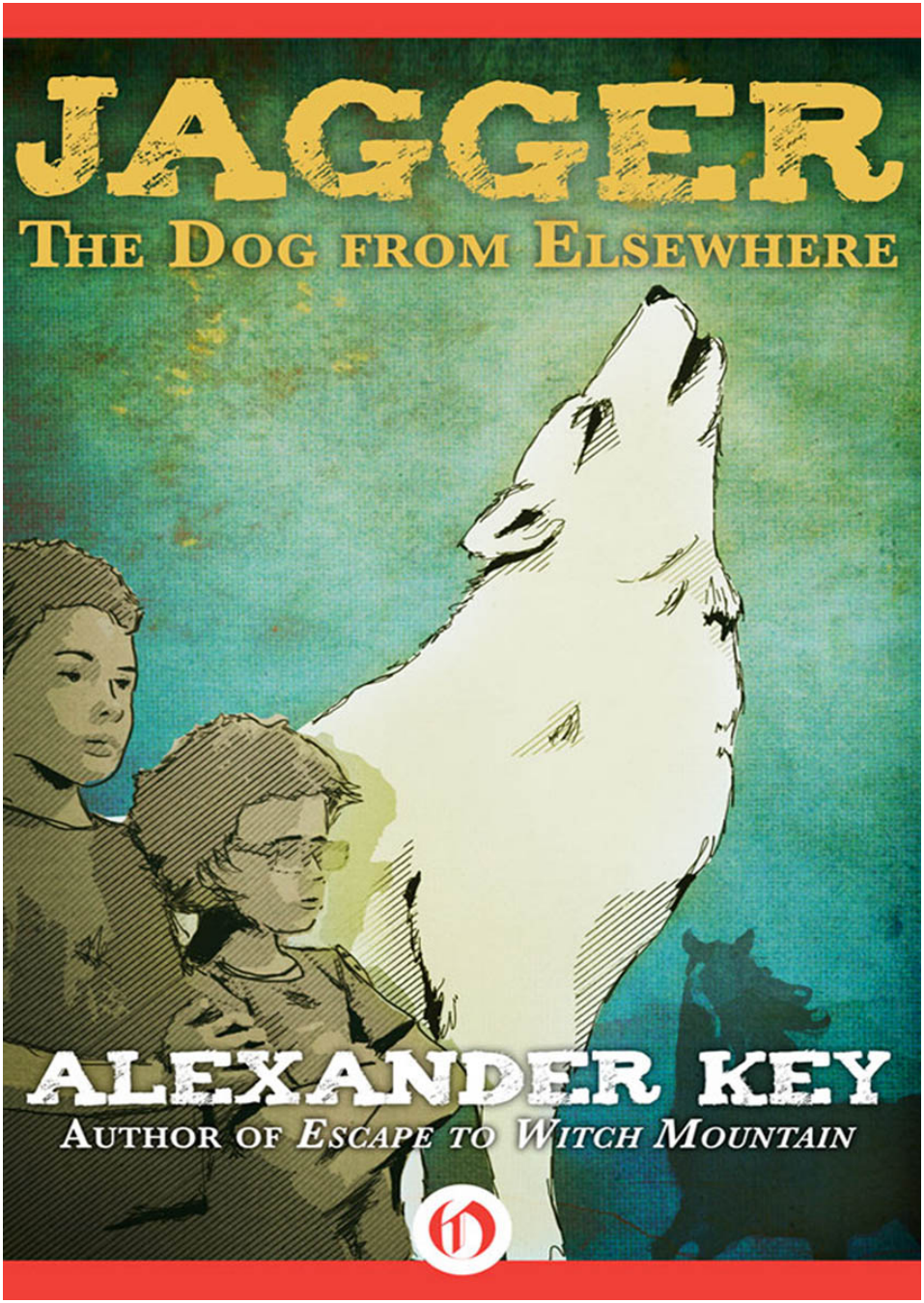
JAGGER
THE DOG FROM ELSEWHERE
ALEXANDER KEY
AUTHOR OF ESCAPE TO WITCH MOUNTAIN

Jagger

Alexander Key

To the great family of dogs—
especially the big ones

ONE *He Is Transported*

When Jagger vanished during the earthquake, everyone mourned. The great white dog was the only casualty, and though he belonged to no one, he was as much a part of the community as the seven Elders, and far better loved. The Elders did little but give good advice, which no one likes to hear. But Jagger was a helper. He policed the gardens, looked after small children, found lost objects, and was always the first to arrive in any sort of emergency. It was not until he was gone that people suddenly realized that life without him would never be the same.

On the morning of the earthquake, just before dawn, Jagger heard the sudden bleating of the goats across the hills, and he went racing through the dark to find out what was wrong. He was very uneasy, and the feeling grew as he realized that the goats ahead were fleeing from something—a something far more disturbing than one of the big cats that sometimes attacked them. But before he could reach them, thunder was rolling across the heavens, and all at once there came a blinding flash of lightning that seemed to cut the world in half. At the same moment the hill he had climbed jerked violently. The force of it sent him tumbling.

Just what happened afterward Jagger never knew. He decided later that the lightning must have stunned him and that he'd probably wandered about in a daze until long after daylight. But it was not until his head cleared and he finally paused to look around that he began to realize something was very wrong.

This wasn't one of the familiar hills where he'd spent his life. That fact was immediately evident. Everything around him was different, from the cold mist creeping down through the trees to the steady roar of a stream somewhere far, far, below. Even the smells were different.

His bewilderment turned to shock as it dawned on him that this was an awfully big hill as well as a strange one, and that he was completely lost upon it. For the first time in all his days he had no idea where he was or in what direction home lay. Worse, he had a terrible feeling that he might never get to see home again.

Jagger was so overcome by this desolate possibility that he could not help raising his head and giving a long mournful howl. It was really a dreadful sound, so haunting that it was hair-raising, and because of his very bigness it carried a great distance. Other dogs on faraway farms heard it and shivered, and howled back in dismay. Birds cried out in fright, and small creatures froze in their burrows as if they had just been told that the end of the world was near.

Jagger heard the far-off dogs and stiffened with quick excitement. Dogs were very rare at home. To find so many of them here was almost unbelievable. Then his excitement rose as he became aware of the low voices of men somewhere down the slope. All humans were his friends. They would be able to tell him where he was and help him.

He gave a short, eager bark and began hurrying down through the mist. As he ran, he sent thoughts of greeting ahead. But when he was within sight of the men, he stopped abruptly. His greeting had not been returned, nor had they even sent forth a question to indicate they had picked up his thoughts.

Jagger found this quite astonishing. Some people could send and receive thoughts better than others, but he'd never heard of anyone who was unable to do it. Why, even little children could communicate this way before they learned to talk. What sort of men were these?

Through the thinning mist he studied the two men curiously. One was very tall and gaunt, standing head and shoulders above the other. Both were roughly dressed in boots and old clothing, and each carried what seemed to be a weapon. His gaze swung from the grim features of the tall man to the wizened face of the second, who was peering about uneasily.

The small man was muttering, "I tell you it was a wolf we heard, Big Joe. What else could have howled like that?"

"A banshee, mebbe," Big Joe growled, in a voice full of gravel.

"Aw, you know there ain't no such a thing as a banshee around here."

"There ain't no wolves, neither."

"Used to be some, years ago. One mighta come back."

"That weren't no wolf, Curly."

"Then what in tarnation was it?"

"Dunno, but I sure don't like it."

Though the language was strange to Jagger, the thoughts and feelings behind the spoken words were clear enough. Everything about them was upsetting. He hadn't known that men like these existed. Realizing he could expect little help from them, he began moving quietly away. But at this moment a puff of wind ruffled the leaves overhead, and the thin curtain of mist hiding him was swept aside.

With a sudden sharp awareness of danger, he gave a great leap that carried him into the misty woods on the right. He was an instant too late. As his feet touched the ground he heard the small man's gasp and Big Joe's startled oath. Then both men began firing.

A numbing blow on his foreleg almost threw him. Somehow he managed to stifle his cry and run on, keeping to the misty trees while he angled down the slope. Long later, more bewildered than he had ever been and trembling from shock and growing pain, he crawled into a thicket to rest and lick his wound while he sought vainly to understand the incredible things that had happened.

It was shattering enough to wake up in a totally strange land after being struck down by lightning—but it was far worse to discover that the people here were his enemies. Why, those men had tried to kill him! It was hard to believe, for men had always been his friends. Yet those two men were different. They couldn't even communicate with him. Was everyone here that way?

As he studied his wound he realized it was much worse than it had appeared at first. Though he had never seen a firearm before, it was easy to guess—from what he'd learned in Elder Norfo's classes—that he'd been struck by some sort of projectile from a gun. The thing had gone on a long, slanting course through his foreleg, making a wound that could cripple him for weeks. No bone seemed to be broken, but he'd lost a lot of blood and he knew he was bound to lose more

unless he could lie here motionless for at least a day or so. It might take several days.

It was a dismaying thought. Food, of course, he could do without for a while. After all, fasting was supposed to be good for the mind. But water you had to have.

Jagger's throat had been dry for some time, but only now did he realize the extent of his thirst. He raised his great head, listening for the rush of the stream he had been aware of earlier. It was faint in the distance, much too faint to be worth the effort of going back to find it. But close on his right he could hear the soft splash of a spring coming down between the rocks.

Pain shot through his leg as he lurched to his feet. Limping carefully over to the trickle of water, he began lapping at a small pool beside a boulder. But he had hardly tasted the cool sweetness of it when all his senses became alert at the sudden barking of approaching dogs. At the same instant the inner ear of his mind caught the anguish of a creature in peril, and its silent plea for help.

Jagger forgot his thirst and his lameness. He whirled to face the open glade on his left, beyond which he could hear the dogs. He was of the ancient breed of guardians, whose every instinct is to protect. No hunter, a guardian, but a protector of the hunted. Jagger's shaggy white coat hid the scars of many battles, mostly with the big spotted cats that came to prey on his people's flocks and especially on the deer that were the children's pets. The only outward sign of these conflicts was in the droop of his right ear. It would not stand up as straight as the other when he raised his ears to hear better, but flopped a little, giving him a droll expression when he cocked his head to one side to listen.

All his attention at this moment was on the frightened creature approaching. His mind had reached out to it, probing. He was not surprised to learn it was a doe, fleeing to save a fawn she had hidden from her pursuers. She was exhausted now and the end seemed near.

Though Jagger had realized from the very start what was happening, it was hard for him to accept the evidence of his senses. Back home dogs did not pursue the helpless. It was unthinkable. What sort of place was this where dogs ran wild, and even the humans killed?

Suddenly there was movement in the misty woods across the glade. Jagger sprang forward just as the doe stumbled into the open.

At the sight of him she stopped short and stood swaying with fatigue while she stared at him bleakly. But already he was thrusting comforting thoughts toward her, urging her not to be afraid. As he sped past, all his attention went to the oncoming dogs, now howling in a frenzy as they rushed in for the kill.

Jagger barked a warning and ordered them to halt. He might as well have ordered the earth to stop its turning.

The dogs, led by a huge wolflike mongrel, howled into the glade. Seeing Jagger, they hesitated hardly a second, then fanned out around him, too excited to heed his warning, too close to blood to stop. Only the leader, feeling himself challenged, and suddenly infuriated at finding the way blocked at the final moment, whirled to fight. He quickly paid for his mistake by being flung away with a broken neck, for the great white newcomer was twice his size and many times as strong.

It was not Jagger's intention to kill, but he had no choice. Only speed could

save the doe. There were five more dogs in the pack, and already the first was leaping for her throat. He caught the dog in midair and flung it away as he had the leader, then sprang for the next. These swift executions were too much for the remainder of the pack. When he whirled to them, they backed away, cringing. Abruptly they turned and fled.

There was something like wonder in the doe's eyes as she looked at Jagger. Slowly she moved over and touched her nose to his in the ancient gesture of trust and friendship. A moment later a distant sound caught her attention. All at once she trotted across the glade and faded into the shadows.

Once more Jagger found himself listening to the voices of men. They were approaching, hurrying, and they seemed excited. They were not the same men he had encountered earlier, but it made no difference. Man, in this strange and dreadful place, was not to be trusted. He quickly followed the doe's example and crept into the forest.

It was almost dark before he found another thicket that seemed safe to hide in. The early dark surprised him. Surely he hadn't really spent a full day wandering about on this strange hillside. Still, maybe he had. He'd been pretty dazed at first. A lot of time could have passed.

His leg was bleeding again and it had become very painful. After he had made himself as comfortable as possible, he tried pressing dried leaves about the wound, but it did little good. If only he'd been born with hands instead of paws, he could have managed it easily, for it would have been nothing to bind the leaves in place with some of the little creepers that grew all around the thicket. But when you have paws as big as lily pads …

Jagger sighed and tried to resign himself to the ordeal of lying perfectly still until his leg healed enough to check the bleeding. He'd have to go without food, probably for days, but that wasn't what bothered him. After all, he and Elder Norfo had often fasted together. "Fasting," the Elder was fond of saying, "is not only good for both soul and body, but it sharpens the mind. Ah, how one gains mentally!"

Jagger hadn't noticed that it did much for him, either mentally or otherwise. But he'd never minded so long as the Elder had a huge bowl of his special porridge ready for him afterward. But who, here, was going to give him a bowl of anything? He didn't like to think about it, but he couldn't remember having seen a thing all day that looked edible. Not a thing.

A family of rabbits occupied the other side of the thicket, and though Jagger was very much aware of them and could have caught one easily—it had always been great fun to play tag with rabbits at home—he would have been outraged at the thought of killing and eating one. He had never eaten meat in his life.

His gloom increased as black dark closed down, and it grew worse during the night. Pain kept him awake, and a cold mist added to his misery. He finally dozed away, only to be awakened at dawn by the uneasy calls of birds and the sudden banging of guns somewhere down the slope. The air was almost frosty.

He worried over the gunfire, and at last questioned the rabbits about it.

He was told that it was the sound of death. The time of greatest danger had come, and all creatures should stay hidden.

Jagger did not immediately understand. Then the truth jolted him. This was

the season when humans liked to kill.

It was the beginning of another bad day, which only seemed to worsen as the hours passed. He had not eaten since the evening before the lightning struck him. Now he was suddenly tormented by visions of his favorite bowl filled with porridge—the Elder's very special porridge made of beans and whole grains. But an even greater torment was a growing thirst. His last drink had been taken from a muddy pool some distance from the thicket, and he dreaded the ordeal of going back to it.

By midday his thirst had become intolerable. He forced himself out of the thicket and managed to limp to the pool, leaving a trail of blood, but after he had lapped his fill, his strength deserted him. Long later the deadly sound of nearby guns drove him to his feet again, and he managed to totter back to his hiding place.

Jagger had hardly settled down in the thicket when the mist, which had been hanging low all day, turned to a chill drizzle. By dark it was raining steadily, and he was colder and more miserable than he had ever been in his life.

Longingly that night he thought of home. He visioned the spry little Elder who had raised him and taught him all he knew, and he thought of the many others who depended on him and loved him—especially the small children like Anda and Lillet and Ereen, who rode everywhere on his back, laughing and singing. Oh, where, where was home now?

Jagger moaned in anguish, and a great wave of homesickness swept over him. In his loneliness and despair he sent a great silent cry into the void.

Oh, Elder, where am I? Can you hear me? Lillet? Anda? Oh, please hear me!

He waited, hardly daring to hope. There was no answer. In his extremity he sent forth a final, despairing call.

Is there anyone, anywhere, who can hear me?

It was now, suddenly, that a small clear voice said hesitantly, "I—I hear you! Who are you?"

TWO *He Becomes a Banshee*

The voice was so startlingly clear that for a moment Jagger was sure the owner of it must be in the thicket, close beside him in the dark. But of course this was impossible, as he realized almost instantly. He was aware of every living thing around him, from the rabbits on one side to the family of white-footed mice in their burrow on the right. Nor could anyone or anything have crept near him unnoticed.

He had heard the voice only in his mind. But why was it so clear? Still, there were some people …

I am called Jagger, he replied. *Who are you?*

"Jagger?" the voice repeated. "What an odd name!" Then it exclaimed delightedly, "Oh, this is wonderful! You're the first person I've ever been able to talk to this way. I can talk to owls and horses and foxes and crows—the crows are the smartest things—but you're the first real person—"

I'm not exactly a person, Jagger interrupted.

"Oh, but you must be!" the voice insisted. "A grownup, I mean. That's how you sound, sort of deep and gruffy, like a man. You *are* a man, aren't you?" But before he could reply the voice hastened on. "When I first heard you I had the awfullest feeling you were in trouble. Maybe hurt or something. *Are* you hurt?"

Yes, he said. *I've been wounded in the leg.*

"Oh, dear! What happened?"

Men tried to kill me.

"But—but I don't understand! Why would anyone want to do that?"

I don't know—except that this seems to be the time when men kill. And I may have frightened them. All this is very strange to me. Why do the humans here kill? I've never heard of such a thing!

"You—you've never heard of hunting season before?"

No.

"Why, I—I just can't imagine—Jagger, what sort of person *are* you?"

I told you I wasn't exactly a person, although I have the status of one in my community. I am a dog.

To the inner ear of his mind now came what sounded like a squeal of delight. It was just the sort of squeal that tiny Ereen back home might have made, and he suddenly realized it must be a small girl he was talking to—and a very remarkable small girl at that. She could send forth her thoughts better than anyone he'd ever known.

"A dog!" she was saying happily. "Oh, I'm so glad! I used to have a little dog named Dandy, and I loved him so, but Aunt Tess hated him, so she—But let's not talk about that. Let's talk about you. Is it raining where you are?"

Yes, Jagger told her, trying not too successfully to hide his misery.

"Oh, how awful!" she exclaimed. "It's just starting here, but I had a feeling it was pouring where you are. You must be soaked through and shaking with the

cold, and hungry besides. You *are* hungry, aren't you?"

Somewhat, he admitted. *But that's the least of it. I've lost so much blood. And still the wound bleeds*.

"Then we'll have to stop it right away," she said hastily. "Peter will know how. He's my brother. He's three grades ahead of me, so he's terribly old and smart. I'll go wake him."

Wait, Jagger ordered. *You can't do anything tonight. And you've no business being in the woods in the dark, in this kind of weather. Don't you realize—*

"Oh, pooh! We're not afraid of the dark, or the woods either. The only real friends we have are in the woods, and that includes old Mr. Rush, the bee man. Anyway, Aunt Tess is away and we're all alone here, so there's nobody to stop us if we want to go looking for you. Just tell me about where you are, and we'll—"

But I don't know where I am! Jagger shot back miserably. *I never saw this place before. I don't even know how I got here*.

"Honest?"

He could feel the shock in her. *All I know*, he added quickly, *is that there was a storm of some kind, and I believe I was struck by lightning. When I woke up everything was different. Everything—the trees, the air, the people, the language …*

"But—but you're still in America, because—"

I never heard of America before.

"But—but you must have! This is Alabama, and you can't be far away, because you're coming in so strong, and anyhow we're both speaking English."

Jagger sighed. *Just because we understand each other doesn't mean we speak the same language. We don't. Yours is strange to me, and I'm sure you don't know mine*.

"B-but—"

It's thought we are communicating with, not language. When I send you a thought, you hear it in your mind in whatever language you happen to know. If you don't know a language, then your mind receives feelings. That's why you can talk to owls and crows and things.

"Oh! Oh, my goodness! I—I didn't realize …"

And that's not all, Jagger hastened to add. *I hate to tell you this, but I know I'm not from this country, wherever it is. I'm from a different place entirely, and I'm beginning to believe it's on another planet*.

It was a fact he hadn't wanted to admit before, even to himself. But it was out at last, and he had to face it. He could never hope to see home again. It was gone forever. And the Elder was gone, and Anda and Lillet and Ereen and all the others he loved.

There was a long shocked silence from the unknown girl who had been talking to him. Suddenly she stammered, "F-from another planet? Well, I'll be a speckled-blue monkey! Wait'll I tell Peter about you!"

Jagger waited, shivering in the cold rain, and tried to keep his mind on the girl. Puzzling over her made it easier to forget himself and his growing misery. She'd forgotten to give her name, although that hardly mattered, for he'd already guessed a lot just by listening to her. A remarkable little person who wasn't really as happy as she sounded. He'd caught shadows of thoughts that told him there was trouble in her life. A great deal of it.

"Jagger," she broke in suddenly, worriedly. "I woke Peter and told him all

about you. But—but he doesn't believe me!"

Does he know you talk to owls and crows? he replied.

"He's seen me do it, for I always talk aloud when I send thoughts out—like I'm doing to you now—only he says anybody can talk to a crow. Maybe he's just putting me on—I can't read his mind like I can other people's. But he says I'm really making it up when I tell him about you—that there's no such thing as a telepathic dog from outer space! Jagger, what can I do?"

We'll think of something. But first, haven't you a name?

"Oh, didn't I tell you? It's Nan. Nan Thornberry. We're at Thornberry Farm. It's more of a ranch, really—a sort of small one, that is—but now that Pop's gone …"

He was aware of a sudden deep sadness in her, then she went on brightly, "Jagger, what about those men that shot you? Maybe Peter knows them. Can you tell me what they were like?"

He described them carefully, then added, *Curly was the little man's name. He called the tall one Big Joe*.

There was a short silence. He was trying to see her clearer in his mind when she said, "Oh, I've met them. And Peter knows all about them. The little one's Curly Brice, and his son, Billy, is in Peter's class at school. Peter says that this morning he heard Billy say that his father and another man were hunting yesterday up on Long Creek Ridge when they heard something awful howling in the mist. Mr. Brice thought it was a wolf at first, but the other man—he's Mr. Joe Tanner—said there were no wolves around, and, to sound so terrible, it couldn't be anything but a banshee."

I did howl, Jagger admitted, *and I heard them say that, but I'm not acquainted with the creature. Just what is a banshee?*

"Oh, it's supposed to be a perfectly ghastly sort of ghost found in Ireland, but people like Mr. Tanner believe they're found here, too. Anyway, Billy Brice says his father told him they'd hardly decided it really was a banshee when they saw it coming at them through the mist. It was white and big as an elephant and absolutely horrible. Jagger, please don't tell me you're horrible and big as an elephant!"

I don't know how big an elephant is, but I do seem to be larger than the dogs you have here.

"You—you've met some dogs?"

Jagger told her about the pack he had been forced to fight. *I didn't know my kind could be so bloodthirsty. I hate to kill, but I had to do it to save the doe*.

Nan was silent a moment. Abruptly she said, "I told Peter what you did, and he says he's heard about the three dogs being killed, and that people are already saying it was done by the banshee. Most of them don't think it's a real banshee, that it's just a dangerous animal which ought to be tracked down and shot. So Peter thinks we'd better start looking for you right away."

No! he told her quickly. *I've already warned you about going out in the woods on a night like this. Anything can happen, and I'm too weak to protect you. If you'll wait till daylight—*

"Aw, don't be an old silly!" she retorted. "Peter and I know what we're doing. Anyhow, if we wait till morning, it may be too late. The hunters are bound to find you!"

There was a short pause, then her voice came again. "We'll be on our way in a

minute. Peter's getting his first-aid kit and the flashlights, and I'm down at the refrigerator packing a lunch. I hope you like raw hamburger, because it's the only meat we have except some canned stuff."

No! said Jagger, revolted. Then, in sudden awful comprehension, he added, *The humans here—they are flesh eaters?*

"Of course! What's wrong with that?" Without waiting for a reply she hastened on, "Stars alive! I never heard of a dog that didn't like meat! But what in the world can I bring you? Macaroni and cheese? That'll have to be it, 'cause it's all we have, and I'll put in a big can of beans to splice out. Here comes Peter with the raincoats, so we're leaving now …"

How do you expect to find me? he asked presently, when he learned that his searchers had gained the woods.

"Oh, that won't be hard," Nan told him, with far more confidence than he knew she felt. "We know you're somewhere on this side of Long Creek Ridge, and that's right back of our farm. All we have to do is follow the old logging road up to the clearing, then take one of the trails. Peter wants to know if you remember crossing a road or a trail after you fought the dog pack?"

In spite of his weakness and all that had happened, Jagger's more-than-ordinary memory was still in good working order. He could recall every yard of the route he had taken since being wounded. Given the chance, he knew he could probably even retrace his way back to the unknown spot where he had begun his wanderings after the lightning flash, nor would the passage of time make any difference.

I did not cross a road, he said. *After leaving the doe, I followed a path made by deer for a while. Then I angled down the slope, crossed a small open place with a puddle of muddy water in it, and went straight on through the woods to the thicket where I am now.*

Jagger paused, trying to think. With the cold and his weakness, it was becoming increasingly hard to keep his thoughts together. He could only guess at directions, for he had not seen the sun since leaving home.

Does the ridge run north and south? he asked finally.

"Yes, and the creek follows it on the east. But not all the way," she added. "About halfway along it sort of turns aside and goes winding away into the low country. Peter wants to know if it sounds very loud where you are?"

No. It seems to be a long way from here.

"Then Peter thinks you must be 'way south on the ridge, and it shouldn't take us any time to find you."

Jagger had his doubts that Peter would be able to locate him without trouble, but he managed to wait patiently, listening. He had acquired a great store of patience from living with Elder Norfo, and considerable philosophy as well, but he could not help worrying about his searchers. They were much too young to be stumbling around in such wild country on a night like this.

Occasionally, at Nan's suggestion, he gave a series of short barks which she answered with a shout. They were able presently to hear each other, but the rain and the thick forest muffled sound and played tricks with it, so that even Jagger found it hard to guess the direction of it. But gradually the rain lessened, and in slow time he saw the wavering gleams of his searchers' flashlights as the children

came stumbling through the dripping woods.

Nan glimpsed him first. She rushed into the thicket and crouched beside him.

"Oh, Jagger!" she breathed, as her small plump arms went around his great shaggy neck. "I thought we'd *never* find you!"

Jagger instantly forgot his ills. His heart melted and despite his weakness he began thumping his tail happily on the ground for the first time since leaving home. She was a small sturdy girl with a round grave face made owlish by a large pair of glasses. The glasses were hornrimmed and so big they almost hid the smattering of freckles across her cheeks. She was bundled in a bright slicker and rain hat, as was the tall thin form of Peter behind her.

Peter, standing at the edge of the thicket, had been playing his flashlight inside. Now he gave a low whistle of amazement. "Why, you—you're about the biggest dog anywhere!" he exclaimed. "You're bigger than a St. Bernard or an Irish wolfhound. Nan, ask him what breed he is."

"This is no time for questions," she told him. "Can't you see he needs help? Why don't you look after his leg while I feed him?"

Peter unslung a knapsack from his shoulder, thrust it into the thicket, and crawled in after it. Nan opened it and took out some plastic containers filled with food, and presently Jagger was having his first taste of macaroni and cheese. This and the beans that followed were not unlike some of the Elder's dishes at home, and in his famished condition they seemed more wonderful than anything he'd ever had in his life.

While he ate, Peter went expertly to work on the wounded leg. Nan asked, "How's it look, Peter?"

"It could be worse," her brother mumbled, his thin face drawn in concentration. "Anyway, the bones seem to be okay, which is something. And there's no infection. Reckon all that bleeding cleaned it out. Lordy, he must have lost gallons of blood. If we hadn't found him tonight …"

Jagger, watching the boy's swift fingers stanch the flow with gauze pads and cotton and then bind the leg, said to Nan, *He certainly seems to know what he's doing.*

"He should," Nan replied. "He learned it from the best doctor in the world, and that's Pop. When he comes back—"

"Pop's not coming back," Peter interrupted shortly. "You ought to know that by now."

"But he's alive! I'm sure of it!"

Peter shook his head. "I wish you were right. Only, they found the plane—what was left of it—and there's not a chance anyone could have escaped. It's pretty hard to take, but we've got to learn to face facts." He paused, then said, "Jagger, do you think you can walk?"

Jagger struggled slowly to his feet. He stood swaying, surprised at his own weakness, and suddenly wondered if he had the strength to move far from the thicket. If he could rest here till daylight, he knew the food he had eaten would give him the strength to travel, but he was very much aware that it would be dangerous to remain. The thought of danger was strong in Nan's mind, and though Peter's thoughts were curiously hidden, he could feel the boy's worry. It was long past midnight, and both children were tired. Yet they had to get him to a safe hiding place before the banshee hunters began searching the woods at

dawn.

I'm very weak, he told Nan, *but tell Peter I'll do my best. Let's go!*

But even as he followed Peter from the thicket, his wobbly legs almost folded beneath him. He knew he would never make it to Thornberry Farm.

THREE *He Is Hunted*

Jagger did his best. He even tried to put his mind into it, as Elder Norfo had taught him—for everybody knew that the Elder could do really incredible things by mind power alone. But it was no use. The thicket was barely a hundred yards behind them when his feet, instead of plodding steadily forward as he told them to, all at once stopped working. He crumpled slowly to the ground, exhausted.

Nan called to Peter, then crouched anxiously beside him. "Are—are you all right, Jagger?"

I—I'm all used up, he admitted, feeling ashamed of his helplessness. It was awful to feel so weak when he had always been so strong. *You and Peter had better go on without me*.

"We'll do no such thing! We'll get you home somehow. Oh, if we just had Palamedes with us!"

"That wouldn't help us," Peter said. "We'd never get him up on Palamedes' back, and we haven't a cart. There must be another way."

Nan asked, "Have you any idea where we are?"

Peter moved a few paces forward, swinging his flashlight about as he tried to see through the blackness ahead. Presently he returned and said, "Looks as though we're near the end of that same old timber road we crossed coming up here."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, we crossed it farther over, and it has to be the same one. There's a high bank just in front of us, and we'll have to drop down to it."

"If you followed it," Nan persisted, "wouldn't you come out at Mr. Rush's place?"

"Yeah. Why?"

But before Nan could tell him, he exclaimed, "Of course! He's got a truck, and I don't think he'd mind if I woke him up and asked him to help us. You stay right here. It won't take me an hour to go and get him."

Peter turned and hurried away into the night. The beam of his flashlight winked out a moment as he slid down the bank to the road, then it reappeared briefly. Jagger could hear his swift footsteps on the gravel until they faded in the distance.

I'm sorry, he told Nan. *I hate to put you to so much trouble*.

"Aw, we don't mind. It—it's sort of fun to be out at night like this."

You're not afraid?

"Of what?"

The big creatures that must run wild here. Surely there are some.

"Oh, there're all sorts of animals—'coons, 'possums, wildcats, and even beavers and otters. But they're not very big, and anyhow they wouldn't hurt a person. The only real big things are the bears, and they stay 'way back in the mountains where it's wilder. We're just on the edge of the mountains here."

She paused a moment, then said, “Of course, there are panthers.”

Panthers? Jagger questioned, and from her mind he visualized a great tawny cat like the ones that preyed on the goats at home.

“Yes,” she said. “Most people don’t believe there are any left around here, but I know better. Mr. Rush has seen them, and he’s showed me the trees where they sharpen their claws. He says they live mainly in the swamps ’way to the south, but there are always a few that wander up here to hunt. I—I’d sure like to meet one. I just love cats.”

Jagger had a private opinion about cats which he chose not to express. After all, he thought, they may have qualities that only a human can see. Especially a very unusual human like Nan.

This Mr. Rush, he began. *Tell me about him.*

“Well, he’s real tall and straight and old, but in spite of being old, he’s amazingly strong. He’s about the strongest man around here. And he sure hasn’t got much use for white people.”

Jagger was surprised. *Do humans come in different colors here?*

“Of course! There are blacks and whites and reds and lots of browns and yellows. Isn’t it that way in your world?”

Not at all. People are mainly a pale brown—some are just darker than others. Are you a pale brown?

Nan giggled. “I’m one of the whites, but I’m tanned from being in the sun a lot.”

What color is Mr. Rush?

“Oh, he’s red,” Nan said quickly. “He’s a full-blooded Creek Indian. Years ago the Creeks used to own all the land in this part of the country. Then the whites came and fought them and drove them away and took their land. But later Mr. Rush’s family were able to buy some of it back. Now he’s the only one left here.”

Jagger was more than a little shocked. *What a strange and terrible story! Nor do I quite understand it. Why would people of one color drive people of another color away? Does one color find another color offensive?*

Nan giggled again. “Oh, it’s not that. It’s the land itself. It’s worth so much. Don’t people fight over it where you came from?”

Certainly not! There is enough for everyone, and it is owned by all. Nor would anyone ever think of taking what belongs to another. He paused a moment, puzzled, then asked, *How did Mr. Rush’s people buy the land back? I do not quite understand the term. Was something used in exchange?*

“Of course!” Nan exclaimed, surprised. “They used money. Did-didn’t you ever hear of money?”

Oh! You mean a valuable medium of exchange, like bits of a rare metal. Naturally I’ve heard of the idea. We discussed it once in one of Elder Norfo’s classes. The children didn’t think much of it.

“My goodness alive! What’s wrong with money? Except not having it, I mean.”

That was just one of the things the class found wrong with it, Jagger reported. *Not having it if you needed it. To acquire food with it, for one thing. Must people here use it for food?*

“Why—why, yes. Of course.”

Then it follows that this cannot be the most pleasant of worlds, Jagger went on. *For many here must be hungry, and nearly all must be slaves of a sort. At least, that is*

how the Elder's class figured it out. Not that I know anything about money, as you call it. It is not used where I came from.

"Not used!" Nan exclaimed. "Well, I'll be triple jigged! How can people buy what they want without it? Unless they're awfully primitive, and use the barter system." She stopped suddenly, then said wonderingly, "Mr. Rush said that in the old days his people never used money either, that it was the white man's curse. I sure wouldn't call *him* primitive. I mean, he lives simply, but there isn't anything he doesn't know. Before he retired to raise bees he used to teach over at the junior college. Say, I'll bet you two would get along just fine."

And he's your friend?

"The best friend Peter and I have."

I thought you told me he didn't like whites. Does that mean you're not really as white as the others?

"Oh, Jagger, you say the funniest things! What he feels about white people as a whole, and the way they think, hasn't anything to do with us. He's always liked the Thornberrys. He practically raised Pop, and even lent him money to study medicine."

As she spoke she had been huddling closer to him in the darkness, and now he was aware that her small body was beginning to sag wearily against him. He did not know the system of timekeeping here, but he guessed that dawn could not be very far away.

You're not going to get much rest tonight, he told her. *Why don't you close your eyes and try to sleep till Peter returns?*

"Oh, I couldn't possibly sleep," she said. "There are too many things to think about."

What things? he asked, all at once sensing the worries now rising in the back of her mind. *Is it missing school tomorrow? You won't be able to go if you've been up all night. Or is it your Aunt Tess that troubles you?*

"It's Aunt Tess," Nan admitted. "She's Mrs. Gomez now, and not really my aunt at all. I—I can't help it, but I'm scared of her. I wouldn't dare tell her about you. And when she comes back and finds we've been out all night, and missed school …"

If she threatens you, just remind her that a big white banshee will come down out of the woods and chase her away. And I will, too!

Nan giggled. "Really?"

I certainly will, as soon as I get my strength back. That shouldn't take long, for I feel better already. Now forget Mrs. Gomez and try to sleep.

He could feel Nan's body relaxing against him. Presently her breathing changed, and he knew she was sleeping.

It had upset him badly to realize that both children, by trying to help him, were only adding to their own troubles. Somehow he must manage to repay them. He'd only been joking when he suggested giving the aunt a scare. But it might not be such a bad idea—if it could be managed at just the right time.

Jagger raised his head slightly, testing his returning strength. The food had helped tremendously. He might even be able to stand and take a few steps, though he doubted if he could walk as far as the road.

He started to lower his head, but a distant sound caught his attention. His droopy ear straightened, and he was instantly on the alert. In his weakened

condition Jagger found the sound almost frightening. It was the baying of a faraway dog pack following a trail.

The banshee hunt had begun.

Weakness forced Jagger to lower his tiring head, but he kept his ears cocked forward, listening carefully. As nearly as he could estimate, the baying of the pack came from the area where he had fought to save the doe. If the dogs followed the right trail, the one leading to the thicket where he had lain so long, the pack would find him by dawn. But there was a chance they would be diverted by the older trail, which could delay them for the better part of the morning. At any rate there was nothing he could do but wait, and really put his mind into a prayer that Peter and Mr. Rush would come speedily with the truck.

Nan slept on, and he was careful not to waken her. While he listened to the dogs, trying to keep track of their progress, he kept one ear tuned for the sound of a motor. Just what the sound would be like he could only guess, but he suspected it would be a sort of discordant hum, one that could be heard from a distance. When Peter and Nan had spoken of Mr. Rush's vehicle, he'd gotten only a fleeting mental glimpse of what it was like, but it had been enough to tell him that it wouldn't be a silent machine like those at home. Anyway, it needed a road to run on.

Suddenly he realized that the blackness had grayed a little and that he could make out the dim forms of the trees around him. Almost in the same breath he heard the truck.

The curious bumping, rattling, earthbound sound of it made him raise his head, and the movement woke Nan. She sat up with a little gasp, then exclaimed, "Oh! I must have been asleep. Do—do you hear anything?"

The truck, he told her.

She listened for a moment. "That's it! I'd know the sound of it anywhere. It's old, but he keeps it running perfectly. And he's just painted it again."

What color?

"A sort of red—but you can't see colors, can you?"

Of course I can! What gave you the idea I couldn't?

"Why, I'd always heard that dogs were color-blind, though I never quite believed it. I'm glad you're not, because—there they come!" she added, and stood up quickly as the lights of the moving truck swung through the trees. "I'd better go down to the road and show them where to stop."

He watched her hurry away through the trees, waving her flashlight. The truck came to a halt, and presently he made out the dim forms of Nan and Peter approaching, with the lean shape of Mr. Rush following like a towering shadow.

As the big bronze man with the graying hair knelt beside him, Jagger knew he had found another friend. Though they could not exchange thoughts directly as he could with Nan, still Mr. Rush seemed to feel what he felt and somehow understand him.

"Brother!" There was admiration and wonder in the quiet voice of the bronze man. "What a great one you are! Jagger, I just couldn't believe it when Peter first told me about you. Then I said to myself, Danta Rush, you're thinking like a white. So I turned my mind around and thought like a Creek. Then I remembered I am only a trifle in a broad universe, and that all things are possible."

Suddenly the Indian raised his head. He listened a moment to the distant dog pack. “Wad Purdom’s bear hounds,” he muttered. “Hot on the trail of the great white banshee. We’d better get away from here, fast. But don’t try to walk, Jagger. I’ll carry you to the truck. That’ll break the scent. If we can fool ’em a while …”

Powerful arms lifted Jagger and carried him swiftly through the woods. Despite the Indian’s strength, Danta Rush was breathing heavily by the time his great burden was placed in the rear of the truck and covered with a tarpaulin. Quickly now, without using the lights, the truck was turned around and driven back the way it had come. The forest was still dim, but dawn was streaking the sky with red and gold.

All at once Jagger was aware of a change in the wild sound of the dog pack, which he could hear above the clatter of the truck. It had turned into a frenzied baying. They must have found his hiding place in the thicket and caught his fresh scent leading away from it.

He listened until a confused barking told him the dogs had reached the end of the trail, then he turned his attention to the man who had come just in time to save him. He could not distinguish the words being spoken up front in the cab, but most of the thoughts were clear. Only Peter’s were obscure.

Danta Rush was saying, “I’d better take you two straight home. You’ve got to get some sleep before your aunt returns.”

“But what about Jagger?” Nan asked. “We’ve got to hide him first. In a safe place.”

“Leave Jagger to me,” Danta Rush replied. “I’ll take good care of him. Better tell him to keep his head well under the tarp from now on. There may be hunters on the road. And we don’t want your hired man to see him.”

“The hired man’s not there,” said Nan. “He went over to Georgia to that auction with Aunt Tess and her husband. They won’t be back till this afternoon.”

“That’s good. A dog like our new friend would be rather hard to explain to some people. And Waddley Purdom wouldn’t hesitate to shoot him on sight.”

“But—but why would he do that?” Nan asked.

“Didn’t you know it was one of Wad’s prized bear dogs that Jagger killed the other day?”

“Oh, golly, I didn’t dream—but those dogs were about to kill a doe, and she had a fawn!”

“That wouldn’t make any difference to Wad. His dogs come first. They can do no wrong. He probably doesn’t even guess what stopped his dog, but if he ever saw Jagger he’d know.”

Jagger, listening in the rear, caught a distorted image of Waddley Purdom that did little to help his uneasiness. He glimpsed a heavy, pear-shaped man with a big jaw, an unpleasant sort of person who was used to ordering other men about. Waddley Purdom, he gathered, owned the biggest ranch in the area.

As the truck swung down out of the forest, he gripped the edge of the tarpaulin between his teeth and pulled it farther over his head, so that he could no longer peer out. Thus it was that he missed seeing Thornberry Farm, and caught only the scent of hay in the barn they stopped near, and the odd smell of strange animals that whinnied at Nan and Peter as they tumbled from the cab.

“They’re horses,” Nan told him sleepily, in response to his question. “We raise

them here. Don't they have horses where you came from?"

Only a very few, he told her, after he had caught the vision of them from her mind. He realized that the Palamedes she had mentioned earlier must be a horse, a very favored one. *They are so rare they are kept only on the main reserve, with a guardian like myself to look after them. I'd certainly like to see one*.

In spite of his weakness his curiosity was so great that he raised his head and started to thrust it from the tarpaulin, but as he did so, he caught the roar of motors over on the main road. They were approaching at high speed. He hesitated, listening. The sound changed, and abruptly he realized the vehicles had left the road and were now coming up the farm's driveway.

Jagger heard Danta Rush give a little grunt of dismay. At the same moment Nan cried out, "Oh, Jagger, be careful! Some cars are coming, and one of them belongs to that Mr. Tanner who shot you."

Jagger hastily retreated under the tarpaulin. He heard the squeal of brakes as the cars were brought to an abrupt stop. Then the rasping voice of Big Joe Tanner called out, "Where's everybody around here?"

Peter said, "They've all gone to that big Georgia auction."

Big Joe swore. Suddenly he rapped out, "Rush, how come you ain't helping us on the banshee hunt? Didn't you git Mr. Purdom's message?"

"I'm not a hunter, Joe."

"Thought you Indians jest lived to hunt!"

"No, we've hunted only to live. There's a slight difference."

"Well, daggummit, you better forgit the difference an' lend us a hand. Them bear dogs done chased the varmint clean around the ridge, but they've lost the trail an' we figger the thing's making for the high country. We aim to head it off with my pack, but we ain't got near enough men to make a line. Go git your gun an' meet us up at the north bridge."

"Sorry, Joe. I've bees to take care of, among other things."

Jagger, listening, was aware of a sudden cold silence following Danta Rush's refusal. There were several cars containing men and dogs. He could hear the eager whining of the dogs, then a low muttering among the men.

Joe Tanner swore again. "Mr. Purdom, he likes folks to come when he calls. He ain't going to take kindly to you turning 'im down." He paused, then asked suspiciously, "Rush, what in tarnation you got hid under that tarp?"

Before Danta Rush could reply, Peter said quickly, "Careful, Mr. Tanner! I wouldn't touch it if I were you. It's a sick dog, and I'm afraid he's dying of rabies —if he isn't dead already. At least I hope it's rabies. From the symptoms, it could be something worse."

"*What?*"

"That's right," Nan added, in a voice that was low and terribly serious. "If it's anthrax, it could kill all the horses. Mr. Rush is taking it away so it won't infect the ground."

"Good Lord!" Joe Tanner gasped. "If it's anthrax, this whole daggone place oughta be quarantined. Let's get away from here, men!"

FOUR *He Encounters Evil*

All the way back on the timber road to Danta Rush's place, Jagger was in a state of mild shock over what had happened. Nan and Peter, by their quick thinking, had saved him from discovery. If he had been found, there would have been trouble—a great deal of it, to judge by what he'd heard. But to avoid it the children had been forced to invent a shattering untruth, and use it to deceive. That was the astonishing and shocking thing.

Yet, he asked himself, what else could they have done? At home, of course, where everyone's thoughts were clear, no one would have dreamed of even trying to deceive. It just wasn't their way. Nor would anyone have placed another in a position where deception was necessary. But in this strange and frightening world, where killing seemed to be done for both pleasure and profit, only rare persons like Nan could tell what another thought. He wished he could talk to her about it, but he made no attempt to call her. She needed rest, and he knew she would be sound asleep the moment she closed her eyes.

The truck stopped after a short ride, and he heard Danta Rush get out. The tarpaulin was drawn aside, and the bronze man said, "Here we are, my friend. Before I take you inside, there's something important I must do. I'll be right back."

Jagger raised his great head and peered curiously around. The truck was parked under a huge old tree that shaded a small brown cottage with a wide porch and a stone chimney. On the other side of the cottage, beneath more large trees, he glimpsed a row of hives. Beyond the hives lay a garden and an orchard. The morning sun gleamed brilliantly on leaves that were beginning to turn scarlet and gold.

Suddenly to his nostrils came the pleasant and very familiar smells of woodsmoke and beeswax, and he thought longingly of home. There was even the low clucking of hens from an unseen chicken yard to remind him of Elder Norfo's cottage, which was not unlike this one except that it was built of stone. Homesickness swept over him like a wave, and he could not restrain a whimper of pure misery.

At that moment Danta Rush appeared from around the side of the cottage with a glass jug in one hand. "What's the matter, fellow?" the Indian asked. "Are you in pain?"

Jagger gave his head a slight sideways movement.

Danta Rush peered at him intently with black eyes that were all at once soft and understanding. "No, it is not physical pain. It is the heart that suffers, and that is worse. You are far from home, and lost. It is a terrible feeling. My people knew it well. Some died when they were driven from home and could not return."

The Indian put a comforting arm about his shoulder. "I don't know how you got here, but there must be a way to get back. So just remember you have

friends, and that we're going to help you all we can. Understand?"

Jagger nodded, and thumped his tail to show his gratitude.

"Good fellow!" Danta Rush said approvingly. "How I wish I could talk to you the way Nan does. Still, maybe we can work out a system. But first I want to rub something on you. Do you know what it is?"

The Indian had taken the cap from the jug, and now Jagger caught the strong, familiar reek of turpentine. Again he nodded.

"So they have pine trees where you came from," the other said quietly, puzzled. "Interesting. Yours must be a world considerably like this one. But I'll bet turpentine was never used by your people to hide a scent. I'm going to rub it over you, especially your feet, and after I've taken you into the house I'll come back and go over the truck with it. I wish I'd had the sense to take the stuff with me earlier."

Jagger looked intently at Danta Rush, and thought, *Do you believe the banshee hunters will come by here with their dogs?*

"Are you asking if I think Wad Purdom will come here looking for you?" said the Indian, pouring some turpentine on his hands and beginning the rubdown. "Yes, I do. Later, when his dogs can't find your scent anywhere. He'll circle, and finally he'll get down to the road and see everyone's footprints, and the spot where the truck turned around. Then he'll guess what happened. So he's bound to come here and ask questions."

The rubdown finished, Jagger was lifted from the truck, carried into the cottage and placed carefully beside the hearth, where a fire still smoldered. The Indian went back outside, and Jagger peered curiously about at the neat room with its handmade furniture and the floor-to-ceiling shelves crammed with books. The sight of so many books brought a sudden pang, for they made him think again of Elder Norfo. The Elder had books all over the place, on about every subject you could name. Jagger was eyeing the shelves, wondering what sort of things interested a man like Danta Rush, when he realized he was being watched.

It gave him a sudden shock to discover the creature standing in what seemed to be the doorway to the kitchen. Ordinarily he would have been aware of it the moment he had been brought into the room, but the turpentine had momentarily ruined his sense of smell, and the creature had appeared without making the least sound.

He knew it was a cat, though never in his life had he seen one like it. All the cats of his acquaintance, even the smaller spotted ones, were fierce killers that could make off with a full-grown sheep. This sleek little creature was hardly larger than a rabbit. It was a beautiful tortoiseshell with golden eyes.

Jagger stared at it in amazement. He was even more amazed when it raised its fur, so that it appeared twice its size, and abruptly hissed at him.

You have no right to be here, the cat told him, its thoughts vibrating with hate and jealousy. *This is my home!*

I am only a visitor, Jagger replied. *I will leave as soon as I am able to walk*.

The golden eyes glared at him, and Jagger added diplomatically, *You are very beautiful. One so beautiful must be greatly loved*.

Golden Eyes lowered her hackles and became sleek again. Her baleful stare turned to one of curiosity. *I despise dogs*, she said, *but I forgive you for being one.*

You are so big and different. Slowly she came over and touched noses with him.

At that moment Danta Rush strode back inside, wiping his hands on a rag. "Well!" he said, chuckling. "I see Cleo has accepted you—which is a great wonder. This is her house, you know. She barely accepts me. She just permits me to live here so long as I feed her. Which reminds me: I haven't had breakfast yet, and I'm sure you could eat some more by now. They tell me you don't care for meat, so how about sharing a pot of oatmeal with me?"

Jagger thumped his tail and nodded. He wasn't sure what oatmeal was, but the picture of it he drew from the Indian's mind was very much like the tasty porridge he was given at home. When it was finally brought from the kitchen—a huge bowl of it with a generous square of butter melting in the milk on top—he went after it as eagerly as if he'd had no food at all that morning. Danta Rush, with a much smaller bowl, sat down near him on the hearth, and they ate together. Cleo, ignoring her dish of milk, sat watching.

"You are wondering about Nan and Peter," the Indian said presently. "They've had a bad time of it lately. You see, their father was lost in a plane accident. Er, do you know about planes?"

Jagger, his head cocked attentively to one side, nodded sagely. He'd never seen a plane in his life, but he'd learned all about them in the Elder's classes. They were primitive flying contraptions the Elder's people had used ages ago, before they discovered how to nullify gravity.

"It happened in South America," Danta Rush went on, just as if he were talking to another person instead of to a huge white dog with a floppy ear. "John was going to a medical convention in Brazil when his plane crashed in the jungle down there. Seems everybody was killed." The bronze man shook his head. "That was a year ago, but it's still hard to believe. I thought so much of John.… Anyway, the kids were staying with their Uncle Rob at the time—he was John's brother—but they'd hardly got word of the accident when Rob suddenly got sick, and died. Mighty queer, that. For it left Tess—Rob's wife—to look after Nan and Peter and inherit half the property."

Danta Rush shook his head again and frowned at Cleo, who was staring at the wall as if she could look through it and see something unpleasant outside.

"That devilish Tess," he muttered. "I'd better tell you about her. She's Mrs. Luis Gomez now—didn't wait a month to marry that little Cuban horse trainer at the farm. Clever man with horses, but he'll do anything she says. She's a big woman with an iron jaw. Oh, a sweet-talking one on the surface—butter wouldn't melt in her mouth—but heaven help you if you cross her."

The Indian paused, then said quietly, "She fills me with a great fear, Jagger. Thornberry Farm is the best ranch of its kind in the state. She could sell it for half a million—and she'd get it all if anything happened to those children. Yet, I don't know what I can do to help them. I'm not allowed on the place when that woman is there, and she's forbidden Nan and Peter to come here. So I suppose the best thing is to just sit tight and be ready—" He stopped, and burst out abruptly, "Cleo! What's the matter?"

The tortoiseshell cat was still staring at the wall, but now she was cringing and backing slowly away, her golden eyes great circles of fear. All at once she whirled and shot through the doorway to the bedroom, and vanished under the bed.

To Jagger it was obvious that Cleo had felt the presence of some unknown but terrible danger outside. He could feel it now himself, nor did he have to see it to know it was there. For a moment he almost imagined that the danger was Tess Gomez, for the woman had been so strong in his thoughts that he could visualize her perfectly and feel the evil behind her pale eyes. Then he realized it was nothing human that had frightened Cleo.

Jagger reached out with his mind, exploring the woods near the cottage, but almost on the instant he recoiled, the hackles rising on his neck. A deep growl rumbled in his throat.

Danta Rush leaped to his feet. "What's wrong, Jagger? What's out there?" He caught up a weapon leaning by the fireplace.

Jagger shook his head. *No!* he urged. *Don't go outside now. Death is out there. It is watching for us*.

That was the only way he could put it. For his mind had touched a blackness near the cottage, a swirling, raging blackness, demented and senseless—and utterly and completely deadly. In all his life he had never encountered anything like it. Yet he knew that it came from a living creature, and that he must prevent Danta Rush from going outside.

The bronze man was almost at the door when Jagger forced himself upright. It took all his strength to reach the door first and block the way. Resolutely he stood there, refusing to move.

Danta Rush frowned, puzzled. "You think it would be dangerous for me to go out there, Jagger?"

Yes, Jagger replied, nodding.

"Something out there might kill me?"

Again Jagger nodded.

"Is it human?"

Jagger shook his head.

"Then you must let me out," the Indian said urgently. "If the thing is really dangerous, I must destroy it before it hurts someone."

Reluctantly Jagger moved aside, and Danta Rush eased the door open and slipped out as quietly as a shadow.

FIVE *He Encounters Trouble*

Jagger returned to the hearth and waited. He was upset and vastly uneasy. A deadly creature stalked the woods outside. Jagger was of the great race of guardians, and it was his duty to go forth and investigate, and even kill if necessary. But today he could not, and his pride suffered. Not only that, but he was worried for the bronze man's safety. There was something about the unknown thing that made it more frightening than any animal he had ever known.

After a long while the door opened and Danta Rush came back in as quietly as he had left. "Not a sign of it," he muttered, shaking his gray head. "No tracks, no sounds, nothing. It's not out there now, thank heaven—but it certainly was at first. I could feel it. So could everything else. All the birds hid. The chickens were petrified. I don't understand it, Jagger."

The Indian went to the window and stood scowling at the woods. "What could it have been?" he asked, puzzled. "The only really dangerous animal in this part of the country is an occasional she-bear with cubs. But that was no bear, or I'd have found signs of it. And I can't believe it was a panther. Anyhow, panthers are not bad fellows. This thing was—bad."

Suddenly he turned and said, "Jagger, during the accident or whatever it was that brought you here, could something else have been displaced with you? Something from your world?"

Jagger had already considered this possibility, and had immediately discounted it. Such dangers didn't exist where he came from. Even the big cats, like the panthers here, were no threat to humans. He shook his head.

"Well," said Danta Rush slowly, "the thing is still around somewhere. If it isn't some sort of phantom—which I don't believe in—it'll leave tracks. I've got to find those tracks, then figure out what made them and get Wad Purdom's dogs over here. If I don't, someone's going to get killed. In the meantime …"

Danta Rush stooped suddenly, and Jagger found himself being lifted and carried into the bedroom, and covered with a blanket.

"You'll be safer here if anyone comes," the bronze man told him. "No one can see you through the windows, and I'll lock the door when I go out. Now, I don't know when I'll be back, but I want you to get some sleep. You need it."

In his exhaustion Jagger was asleep almost the moment he closed his eyes, yet a small part of his mind remained awake and sharply alert. It was aware of Danta Rush going out and locking the door; it heard the chattering of squirrels in a walnut tree outside; and even while he slept on, it caused his ears to shift enough to pick up distant noises which it quickly analyzed and put aside as harmless.

Twice during the morning this watchful corner of his mind heard the faraway yelping of dogs, and once there came a high, sharp cry of fear and pain that was abruptly broken off. These sounds made him stir uneasily, but did not waken

him. At long last, however, he became aware of a sudden faint noise down the road. It had the jangling effect of an alarm.

Jagger was wide awake on the instant. He raised his great head, realizing even as he listened that he had been asleep a long time, and that it was now well into the afternoon. The thing he had heard was a car coming from the direction of Thornberry Farm. By its sound he easily recognized it as the one belonging to Big Joe Tanner.

As it drew nearer he wondered where the other cars were that earlier had followed Big Joe's to the farm. Then he was surprised to hear them approaching from the opposite direction, moving down through the woods the way he'd ridden when Danta Rush had rescued him.

Jagger puzzled over this a moment, then quickly decided the timber road along the ridge must have a fork. The remaining cars had taken the fork in order to swing over and pick up Waddley Purdom and the other men who had spent most of the day tramping across the ridge.

The first car stopped in front of the cottage. Presently the other cars approached and stopped near it. He could feel the frustration and anger in the men as they got out and held a short consultation. Finally heavy footsteps crossed the porch. Someone pounded on the door, then rattled the knob.

"Open up, Rush!"

The voice was deep and demanding, and Jagger wondered why the humans of this curious world so loved authority. At home no one wanted to lord it over others, or even impress them with what he owned. It seemed so silly, when knowledge and understanding were what really mattered.

In the middle of his wondering he was surprised to hear Danta Rush call out in answer from somewhere in the woods. Soon the Indian's light tread sounded near the porch.

"You seem upset about something, Wad. What's going on?"

"You know daggone well what's going on!" the deep voice growled. "Seems to me you know a little too much! Just what were you doing up at the end of the road this morning with those Thornberry kids?"

"Any reason I shouldn't be up there if I wanted to investigate something? It happens to be my land."

Waddley Purdom swore. "I don't care who owns it! I asked you a question. You gonna answer it?"

"I'll answer it when I get ready," Danta Rush said firmly. "Now all of you calm down and listen to me a moment! This is far more serious than any of you realize. First, what's happened to your dogs? Joe, you had two this morning. Where are they?"

"One's in the car trunk, dead," Joe Tanner ground out. "The other disappeared, same as Mr. Purdom's did."

"What killed your dog, Joe?"

"That devilish banshee done it! What else?"

"How? By breaking its neck?"

"No," the other rasped. "The varmint clawed it to death."

Waddley Purdom said angrily, "Why all this nonsense, Rush?"

"This is no nonsense, Wad. I didn't see those dogs that were killed the other day, but I understand their necks were broken …"

"Well, what of it?"

"Were any of them clawed?"

"No. What are you getting at?"

"Just this," Danta Rush said slowly. "An animal that kills by breaking another's neck doesn't go in for clawing. What I'm getting at is that your dogs started out to hunt one animal this morning—probably a big dog—but lost the trail and then quite by chance picked up the trail of another creature entirely."

The Indian paused, then said, "Joe, when was your dog killed?"

"Soon after we got to the bridge. They started following a fresh trail right off. So I figure we got there just in time to turn the varmint an' keep 'im from escaping to the mountains."

"No, you figured wrong, Joe. As nearly as I can make it out, you got there just in time for your dogs to get in the creature's way. It was coming *down* from the mountains, and God help anything that crossed its path. Your other dog was probably killed too. Then the thing came on over in this area, and Wad's dogs picked up its trail."

"Yeah?" Joe Tanner sounded unbelieving. "How come you know so much?"

"Because I've spent the best part of the day trying to piece things together. I found where Wad's dogs caught up with the thing. It's over the slope here, by that little waterfall on Spring Branch. Wad, I hate to say it, but you lost a dog there. He was clawed to death."

"No!'

"Go see for yourself. But don't go alone."

Waddley Purdom cursed. "I'm not afraid of that devilish dog killer! I'll fix it if it's the last thing I do! Er, any idea what happened to the rest of my pack?"

"They were scared off."

"You—you're crazy! My dogs wouldn't run from a tiger!"

Danta Rush sighed. "Maybe not, Wad, but this is something else. It's worse than a tiger. Right now it's ten times as dangerous, and nothing with any sense will go near it. We've got to warn people to stay out of the woods till we destroy it."

There was a sudden silence. Finally someone muttered, "What you reckon it is, Rush?"

"Don't know yet. I've been trying to find a footprint. But with all the leaves—"

"I know what it is," Joe Tanner's gravelly voice interrupted. "There ain't but one banshee in these woods, an' it's the same big white varmint Curly an' me seen the other day. Big as a danged horse, he is. I don't rightly know what you'd call it—banshee's as good a name as any—but that's what we been after from the start, an' that's what killed all our dogs."

"Joe's right," Waddley Purdom growled. "Rush, you're sure off the beam—unless you got some reason to mix us up. Have you?"

"Why would I do that, Wad?"

"You know why!" the deep voice said accusingly. "You hate our dogs—always complaining about 'em taking after the deer. As if a few deer mattered! Why, I wouldn't put it past you to make up this tale about a second varmint just so you could kill off some of my dogs an' put the blame on an animal!"

"Now you're talking like a fool, Wad."

"Don't call me a fool! Tell me what you were doing up at the end of the road

this morning with the Thornberry kids!"

"That's none of your business, Wad."

"It *is* my business!" the deep voice rumbled. "I'm a rancher, and anything that could threaten my cows is my business! Joe tells me you picked up a sick dog that may have had anthrax. Now I want the truth. Out with it!"

"Waddley Purdom, there's no sick dog with anthrax. That was just Nan's way of keeping Joe from being too nosy about something that didn't concern him. It doesn't concern you, either. Now I think it's time all of you got on your way before we lose our tempers."

"Blast you!" Joe Tanner burst out. "What are you trying to hide, Rush? You're sure up to something!"

"That's what I want to know!" Waddley Purdom rumbled. "What are you up to, Rush? You'd better tell me, or I'm going to make you one sorry man!"

There was a silence, and Jagger could feel Danta Rush's anger mounting dangerously. Suddenly the bronze man said, "I'm years older than any one of you, but I'm still a better man than any two of you. Now get out of my sight before I prove it!"

SIX *He Faces a Dilemma*

Jagger was astounded at the violence he could feel in the men outside. For a frightening moment he was afraid it would explode into a bloody fight. But under it all he could sense a curious respect and fear that held the violence in check. Not even Big Joe Tanner wanted to trade blows with the bronze man.

There were mumbled threats and low mutterings, but finally the banshee hunters piled into the cars and rode angrily away.

Danta Rush unlocked the door and came slowly into the room. He replaced his weapon in its corner by the fireplace, then stood on the broad stone hearth, scowling and snapping his long fingers. Suddenly he saw Jagger looking at him from the bedroom. A smile creased his leathery face.

"So! You heard the whole thing! Do people where you're from act like those idiots?"

Jagger shook his head. Then, raising it in a questioning gesture so that his floppy ear stood up, he tried to send forth a thought.

The Indian picked up the substance of it immediately. "Am I a fighter of some kind—a fighter with my fists?" The dark face smiled again. "Yes, Jagger. You got that out of their minds—only you'd never heard of boxing. Evidently your friends at home don't go in for that sort of thing. Well, in college I was the amateur heavyweight boxing champion—the world title—and those men know it. They also know I'm very handy with a rifle."

Danta Rush paused, frowning. "How do you feel now?"

For answer, Jagger got carefully to his feet and walked into and across the living room. He was weak, but his legs were steady. He gave a little nod, then stretched out on the hearth.

"Good!" said the Indian. "You're doing better than I expected. In a couple more days you ought to be strong enough to help me. For I'm sure going to need some help. Jagger, can you follow a scent?"

Jagger shook his head at an angle.

"Not exactly your strong point, eh? Well, we've got to find that—that *other* banshee, or whatever it is, and put an end to it before it kills somebody. Think you can manage to locate it by some means or other, and lead me to it?"

Jagger replied with a vigorous nod.

Danta Rush looked relieved. "Thank heaven for that. Now, we've got to get in touch with Nan right away. I don't have a telephone, though I doubt if it would help us if I did. That Gomez woman absolutely refuses to let me have anything to do with the kids, and on top of that she's a good friend of Wad Purdom. If I know Wad, he's on his way there right now to ask questions. We've got to warn Nan. See if she's awake yet."

Jagger closed his eyes and concentrated. *Nan, can you hear me?*

Her reply came almost instantly. "Of course I hear you! Stars alive, I've been trying to reach you for the longest time! Are you all right?"

I've been asleep, he explained. *Now I feel much better. Wad Purdom has just left here, and we think he's on his way to your place. Wait—Danta Rush wants me to tell you something.*

He glanced up at the bronze man, and nodded.

"You've got her, Jagger? Fine! Let her know that Wad is going to be after her to explain about that sick dog with anthrax I had in the truck this morning. She's to tell Wad the truth—just the bare truth, and no details. That she heard a dog up on the ridge that seemed to be in trouble, that she and Peter came to me for help, and that we found a white dog someone had shot. That's all. Except, of course, that she made up the anthrax part to scare Big Joe away. She was afraid he was the one who shot the dog. That clear?"

Jagger nodded and relayed the message to Nan. *Do you understand?* he asked. *That ought to satisfy everybody without giving anything away*.

"I—I sure hope it does," she said uncertainly. "I wish I hadn't pulled that about anthrax this morning, but it was the only screamy-scary thing I could think of in a hurry. Only it's bound to set Mr. Purdom off. He just won't leave a thing alone when—Oh, golly gee, here he comes now!"

Jagger could sense that Nan wanted almost desperately to tell him something else, something extremely important, but there was no time for it at the moment. She was one of those persons who had to talk aloud, if only in a whisper, to send her thoughts, and she would hardly risk doing it when others could hear. This convinced him that she and Peter were no longer alone in the house, and that Tess Gomez must have returned.

He glanced up at Danta Rush, nodded twice to show that the message had been received, then resigned himself to uneasy waiting.

The Indian kindled a small fire in the fireplace, then went into the kitchen to fix supper. At the sound of cans being opened, Cleo appeared miraculously from nowhere and loudly demanded food. When she had eaten, she came over to the hearth and sat down near Jagger to lick her chops. She was very smug and self-satisfied.

This is my house, she told him. *So naturally I am always fed first*.

Naturally, Jagger admitted. He forced himself to admire her beauty so she would not glean from his mind what he really thought of her.

For an impossible dog, she went on, *you are really quite likable. With you here, I felt much safer this morning when the horror came by again*.

The horror has been by here before? Jagger asked.

Yes. Days ago, when the mist crept down from the mountains. It came by in the night when all were asleep except me. I was outside, and I saw it. I thought I would die. Her golden eyes widened, and she shivered with the memory.

Jagger stared at her. *You actually saw it?*

I saw the horror. It was big, big, big—bigger than you. And it was black, black, black.

Jagger tried for more details, but beyond the simple description she had given him Cleo could not go. The thing was very big and very black, and something unspeakable about it had chilled her to the marrow. For the first time Jagger began to wonder if, by some curious chance, the accident that had brought him to this world had brought something else from another world not too different from his own.

The thought startled him. It startled him so much that he sat up suddenly, his floppy ear straightening until it was as erect as the other. For now he remembered Elder Norfo once saying that their world was only one world of three, all very much alike, and all existing in the same space. You couldn't see the others, the Elder had said, for each world had its own special dimension, and their only connection was an occasional short circuit between their electromagnetic fields.

At the thought of short circuits and electromagnetic fields, which had almost escaped his memory, a great light dawned in Jagger's mind. Why, of course! he reasoned. That's how I got here! The lightning struck and the ground heaved, so there must have been an earthquake. It was all part of a short circuit, and somehow it flipped me in the wrong direction.

With that mystery solved, Jagger did not waste mental effort wondering how he could reverse the action and send himself home. It couldn't be done, at least not by a dog. And quite aside from the fact that it was entirely beyond the abilities of the average human, he knew he wouldn't leave now even if he could. He was needed here. Soon, he was absolutely sure, Nan and Peter would be in desperate need of his help. He could feel it coming. And of immediate concern was the horror that he and Danta Rush must somehow track down and destroy. Maybe, with luck, he would be strong enough to try it in the morning.

The bronze man brought his supper—a big warm bowl of mixed grains which he was told were peas and rice. A truly wonderful combination, he thought, but he ate absently, for he was still puzzling over the strange creature he might possibly be forced to fight. What manner of thing was it? And what world was it from? Not his own, surely. But it could be from the third world—something entirely unknown and frightful.

"What's troubling you?" asked Danta Rush, who had sat down near him again to have a dish of the same mixture. "Is it the other banshee?"

Jagger nodded, and looked hard at the Indian while he sent forth a question.

"What do I think it is?" came the reply. "H'mm. It's not a bear. Doesn't even act or move like one. And I'm certain it's not one of our native panthers. Cleo might be afraid of a panther, just as she would be of a wildcat, but she wouldn't be terrified. Now, there's a possibility it could be something that escaped from a circus or a zoo—a jaguar or a leopard perhaps, or even a tiger. But somehow I doubt it. Some poor creature is always escaping, but usually it's so bewildered from being locked in a cage that it's easily shot or captured."

For the first time in his life Jagger wished his huge paws had the ability to make signs or draw symbols, for how else could he explain to the bronze man about the third planet, or tell him what Cleo had told him? If only Nan were here, it would be easy, but from the looks of things it might be days before he even saw Nan and Peter again. As for the animals Danta Rush had mentioned, he'd had no trouble visualizing them, but not one seemed to fit Cleo's description. *Big, big, big*, and *black, black, black*. Of course, in Cleo's awed mind, the thing was probably a great deal bigger and blacker than reality.

Yet the fact remained that Cleo had first seen it soon after the lightning flash and the earthquake. And if it wasn't from this world or his own, it had to be something from the third world. A black and senseless something, with a raging blackness in its mind …

Jagger's uncomfortable thoughts were suddenly interrupted by Nan calling urgently, "Jagger, can you hear me?"

Something was wrong. *I hear you. What is it, Nan?*

"Peter and I have got to run away. Tonight."

No! he flashed back, horrified at the very idea of the two of them alone in the forest. *You must stay out of the woods!*

"Don't be silly! Peter and I know what we're doing. As I've told you before, there's absolutely nothing outside to be afraid of!"

There is now! he warned. *Something terrible is on the loose, and it's already killed every dog that got too close to it today*.

"You—you're not fooling me?"

Certainly not! It went by the house here this morning. We didn't see it, but we felt it. Everything here felt it and was frightened. Danta Rush spent a long time looking for it, but all he found was one of the dogs. Didn't Wad Purdom tell you?

"Why—why, yes. But I didn't understand. He said the banshee had killed some more dogs—but it just didn't make sense to us. And he got real mad when I told him the truth about you. The bare truth, I mean, like you said. Jagger, wh-what in the world is going on?"

He told her all that had happened. *Those hunters*, he added, *they think it's the same banshee they've been after from the start. They won't believe Danta Rush, and they've no idea how dangerous it is*.

"But—but, Jagger, what *is* it?"

We don't know. I'm afraid it's a—a strange something that was displaced and accidentally dropped here at the same time I was. It's a horror, Nan, and no one can afford to take chances with it.

"How—how awful!"

He could feel the shock in her. There was a long pause, then she said, "But, Jagger, we—we've got to take our chances. Because, if we stay here, something's going to happen to us."

What?

"I—I don't know yet. But the idea is getting clearer in Aunt Tess's mind. I could sort of sense it there before she left. Now she and that snaky Mr. Gomez are back, and it's real strong. Even Peter can feel it."

I don't quite understand, Jagger replied, and added hesitantly, *Do you mean she's actually planning to—to get rid of you? To destroy you?*

"Y-yes."

This was such a jolt to Jagger's sensibilities that his great mouth fell open and for a moment he was incapable of speech. He was vaguely aware that both Danta Rush and Cleo were watching him curiously, yet he realized that both must know he was in the midst of a thought exchange with Nan.

I've never heard of such a terrible thing, he told her finally. *Is it a common practice here? I mean—one human destroying another for gain?*

"Stars alive, Jagger, it—it isn't exactly a common practice, but people sure do it. And, Jagger, I—I'm scared. So is Peter. We've just got to leave—"

Now wait, he interrupted. *How does she intend to do it? And when? Do you know her plan?*

"All I know," she said, "is that the thought's in the front of her mind instead of the back. She and Mr. Gomez must have talked it over while they were away,

and agreed to do it."

You don't know when, or how?

"I think they were trying to decide how they'd manage it when the banshee hunters came. Aunt Tess was furious with us when she found out we'd been away most of the night with Mr. Rush. Usually she would have given us a licking for disobeying her, but this time she didn't. In spite of being mad, she just gave us one of those funny-sweet smiles of hers, and said it was the last time we'd ever do anything like that. Golly gee, if you could have heard her! Something about it made my skin crawl."

Where are you now? Jagger asked.

"Up in my room with the door locked. Peter's room is next to mine, and he's locked his door too."

Then you ought to be safe for the night, he told her. *I've never known a human to do anything without making several decisions, and she's made only one. She still has to decide how and when, and probably where*.

"But—Jagger, people are not always like that. They—they just suddenly do things. And if they are sort of, well, crackers, like she is—"

Crackers? I do not understand you.

"Oh, I mean a little crazy, sort of off her rocker. And I really think she is."

Are you trying to tell me there is something wrong with her mind? That she does not have proper control of it? That she is slightly demented?

"Something like that. And she—she likes to hurt things. My—my poor little dog, Dandy—but I can't talk about it. Jagger, I—I'm scared. I don't think we should stay here tonight."

Jagger was astounded. He'd never heard of a human like Tess Gomez. At home no one ever lost mental control. What were the terms for it? Off one's rocker? Crackers? Crazy? He liked the last, and it seemed to apply to the whole planet. Everything was crazy here, even most of the people.

"Jagger, what should we do?" Nan called plaintively.

Can you talk to Peter in the next room? he asked.

"Yes. We've opened the connecting door."

Then tell him about the new banshee. He's got to know. While you are doing that, I'll try to explain to Danta Rush that you want to leave.

"How in the world can you manage it?"

I don't know, but I'll try.

"Oh, if he only had a telephone! But he's always hated them."

If I'm unable to make him understand, I'm sure I can get him to meet you somewhere in his truck. Now tell Peter about the banshee.

SEVEN *He Is Accused*

Jagger opened his eyes and saw that Danta Rush was watching him intently. Even the haughty Cleo seemed to be aware of what was going on, for she was slowly switching her tail as if her nerves were on edge. Dusk had come, but the only light in the room came from the small fire in the fireplace.

"What's brewing, Jagger?" the Indian asked quietly. "Trouble at Thornberry Farm?"

Jagger nodded quickly.

"Are the kids in danger?"

Again he nodded.

"That Gomez woman up to something?"

Jagger nodded for the third time.

Danta Rush scowled at the fire. "I might have known it. She wants the place. That means she must get rid of Nan and Peter. So it's come to the point where she's actually decided to do it—and Nan read her mind. Right?"

At Jagger's nod, the bronze man stood up and began pacing the room, snapping his fingers. Suddenly he stopped. "I see it," he muttered. "Of course the kids are scared. The only thing they can do is run away—then you told them it would be dangerous to go out tonight. Right again? So far, so good. Now if they remain at the farm tonight, there's the question of their safety. That would depend on how far that devilish Tess has gone with her plans. Has she decided exactly what she's going to do?"

Jagger shook his head.

"Good! If she hasn't worked out the details, that gives us time. However, if Nan feels she and Peter absolutely must leave tonight, tell her I'll meet them in the truck on the edge of the road near their mailbox."

Jagger called Nan and relayed the message.

"Peter thinks we should stay here until tomorrow," she told him. "He doesn't believe we'll be in any real danger until tomorrow night, after the hired man has left, and after Aunt Tess has come back from shopping. Tomorrow's Friday, and the hired man always goes to town for the weekend. And on Friday afternoons, Aunt Tess and her husband always go in to do their shopping. Peter's idea is for us to catch the school bus and go on to school, just as usual. By the time we get back in the afternoon, Aunt Tess will be in town and there won't be anyone around to bother us while we pack our clothes and leave."

Then you'll come straight here? Jagger asked.

"We'll decide that later. Anyway, Mr. Rush will have to take us somewhere to a bus station so we can catch a bus to Baton Rouge. You see, that's the main reason for going to school tomorrow—so we can slip away at noon and go to the bank and draw out our savings."

Savings? he repeated.

"Yes. We'll need money to travel, and we've enough saved up to take us to

Baton Rouge. That's 'way over in another state, and we've a great-aunt there who's been wanting us to visit her for a long time. She's a real nice old lady, and I'm sure she'll take us in. Now, if you can think of some way to do it, will you please tell Mr. Rush what we've planned?"

Jagger had the uncomfortable feeling that Peter was making a mistake, and that the children ought to be leaving tonight instead of tomorrow. After all, it would be no trouble to get Danta Rush to meet them with the truck. But as he relayed part of the plan to the bronze man—with the help of careful questioning—it brought a nod of approval.

"That should work out all right," he was told. "By the time the kids get home from school, everyone should be in town shopping. They'll have an hour or more to get their things together, and I can be waiting for them to take them to a safe place. Now, let me see …"

Danta Rush paused, then said, "I can't bring them here. They'll be found for sure, and it'll just make trouble with the law."

The law? Jagger questioned.

"Are—are you asking me what the law is?" the bronze man said.

Jagger nodded.

The Indian stared at him. "I can't believe you came from a lawless world. But maybe your people are so intelligent and honest they don't need armed guards to protect them from criminals. Come to think of it, my people didn't go in for that sort of thing either. In the old days no Creek ever killed for gain or stole from a neighbor. That's the white man's way. As for the white man's law, it would send the children back to that Gomez woman, because she's their legal guardian—and it might even send me to jail for kidnapping."

At Jagger's look of utter astonishment, Danta Rush added, "The only way the law would favor the kids is absolute proof that Tess Gomez intends to murder them. And how can you prove that? Who would believe Nan can truly read her aunt's mind?"

The bronze man frowned. "Now, about tomorrow. I'll have to take the kids somewhere. It may turn into a real trip, so I'd better go to town first thing, stop at the bank, and then get a full tank of gas and some supplies. H'mm. They've got an elderly relative somewhere. Wonder if that's where they're thinking of going."

At Jagger's quick nod, Danta Rush snapped his fingers. "Of course! That old lady in Baton Rouge! They ought to be safe with her, especially if they can get there without anyone knowing about it. Well, I'll see to that. Now, I think the kids will be okay for the night, but if Nan calls you for help, wake me and we'll get over there fast."

A sleepless Nan called him several times before dawn, but it was more for comfort than anything else. "Oh, Jagger," she told him once, "I feel so much better knowing you're near, and having you to talk to. Golly, I'm sure going to miss you when we leave!"

You can still talk to me, no matter where you go, he told her.

"Really? As far away as Baton Rouge?"

I don't know how far that is, he replied. *But it would make no difference if you went halfway around the world. Once contact is made—and you make it by calling to that particular person—then distance doesn't matter*.

"Well, I'll be jigged! I didn't dream—Then I'll sure call you when I get to

school. But it'll have to be when no one can see me, or they'll think I'm cuckoo, talking aloud to myself."

Breakfast was over, and Danta Rush had put the cottage in order and gone out to the truck to drive to town, when Jagger again heard Nan's voice in his ear. She and Peter had arrived at school only a little while before.

Nan spoke quickly, and he could feel the excitement in her. "Oh, Jagger, something awful happened last night! All the kids are talking about it. That—that other banshee, it really went wild and killed cows all around the country here! I don't know how many were clawed to death, but they say Mr. Purdom lost nearly a dozen. And, Jagger—"

Wait! I must somehow tell Danta Rush. He is just leaving.

"Oh, golly gee, tell him Mr. Purdom blames him for it all! Tell him Mr. Purdom actually thinks he's hiding the banshee!"

Jagger's wound was far from healed, but it had become so much better that he didn't even feel it as he leaped to his feet and lunged to the window. The front door had been locked for his protection against chance visitors, and though he could have unlatched the kitchen door and raced around the cottage, he knew there wasn't time for it. Already he could hear the truck moving out into the road and gathering speed.

There was only one thing to do. He began to bark.

The lusty sound rattled the windows and set up a clamor of alarm outside in the chicken yard. Cleo, daintily sipping a second dish of milk beside the fire, abruptly bolted into the bedroom. Down on the road the truck suddenly halted, then sped backward to the cottage.

Danta Rush leaped out and hurriedly unlocked the front door. "Something wrong, Jagger? Did Nan call you?"

At his nod, the Indian said, "Where is she? At school?" Jagger's second nod brought: "Any change in plans?" Then, after a quick shake of his head: "But something's happened?"

Jagger nodded again and tried to project a mental image of Waddley Purdom, followed by visions of dead animals in a field.

The bronze man almost got it. "Something about—Wad Purdom?"

At that moment Jagger became aware of the swift approach of cars. He nodded quickly, then raised a forepaw and pointed down the road.

The first car that stopped before the cottage had a star painted on the side. Out of it stepped a tanned young man with a badge pinned to the front of his khaki jacket. Four men with rifles piled from the second car. Leading them, moving with deliberate slowness, came the pear-shaped figure of Waddley Purdom. Striding watchfully behind him, gun held ready, was Big Joe Tanner.

Danta Rush glanced at the tanned young man, then frowned at the men with guns. "What's this all about, Wad?" he asked.

"You know what it's about!" the rancher growled. "Arrest him, Bill!"

"Arrest me for what?" the bronze man demanded.

The young man with the badge said hesitantly, "I—I'm sorry, Mr. Rush, but something killed a lot of Mr. Purdom's cows last night, and he believes you're responsible. So I'll have to take you in. I—I've also got a search warrant so we can search your place. Folks have got the idea that you're hiding some sort of

dangerous animal here, and we've been ordered to find it and kill it."

Waddley Purdom said, "Fan out men. Surround the house."

Jagger, standing hidden just within the doorway, was rudely jolted by what he read in the men's minds. He had never heard of jail until coming here, or of people being forcibly locked away in a barred cell. While he was trying to adjust to the incredible thought of what was in store for Danta Rush, he heard the bronze man whisper urgently, "Run, Jagger—the back door! Turn the knob to the right, then pull the door toward you. Hurry!"

Suddenly aware of his own danger, Jagger whirled and sped into the kitchen. Opening the rear door gave him no trouble, for it was merely a matter of catching the knob between his teeth and turning his head. The trouble came after he had eased out onto the small back porch and was leaping for the protection of a shed a few yards behind the house. There was sudden movement over on his left, and he glimpsed a gaunt figure with a rifle swinging up from the road. It was Big Joe Tanner.

Jagger heard Big Joe's yell, followed an instant later by the sharp crack of the rifle. This time the shot missed, and he gained the far corner of the shed and was able to plunge unharmed into the plum thickets at the edge of the garden. As he raced on, running on three legs to save his injured one, he could hear Big Joe Tanner shouting to the others.

"It's that devilish banshee—the same one I seen the other day! All white he is, an' big as a daggone mule!"

In the dappled shade of the woods beyond the chicken yard, Jagger paused briefly to decide on a direction, then turned to the left and began angling down the long slope away from the cottage. Presently, when he could make out the lower part of the road ahead, he crouched in the shadow of a tree to watch and wait while he tried to plan what to do.

He was sick at heart over what had happened, and it was hard to pull his thoughts together and think. But think he must, for with Danta Rush a prisoner, there was no one to protect Nan and Peter but himself.

With things the way they were, how was he going to manage it?

EIGHT *He Meets a Strange Creature*

Jagger's leg was aching badly from the sudden strains he had put on it, but no harm seemed to have been done. Peter's bandage still held, and there was no sign of bleeding. Of far more concern was the overwhelming wave of weakness that had come over him when he stopped behind the tree. At the moment he doubted if he had the strength left to rise. But maybe the weakness would pass after he'd rested a while …

All at once, in the back of his mind, a door seemed to open that had somehow been closed when danger threatened. He was aware of Nan's voice again.

"Jagger?" she called plaintively. "Jagger? Can you hear me? Oh, please answer!"

I hear you now, he replied quickly, happy to be in contact with her again.

"Oh, thank goodness! I've been so worried. I've been trying for half an hour to get you, but not a peep out of you. Something's gone wrong—I just feel it. What's happened?"

He told her exactly what had happened, and how he had barely managed to get away in time.

Nan was furious. "Oh, that dirty, contemptible old Waddley Purdom!" she burst out. "I wish he'd turn into a bug so I could step on him! But—but what about Mr. Rush? Did that deputy take him off to jail?"

He's taking him now, Jagger reported, as he saw the car with the star on it going by on the road. *Are you still in school?*

"Sort of. I mean, I'm supposed to be in class, but I sneaked out so I could talk to you without being noticed. Oh, golly gee, I don't know what to do now. If Mr. Rush is in jail, he won't be able to meet us and take us to a bus station. Maybe we'll have to change our plans." Nan paused a moment, then said, "I'll talk it over with Peter when I meet him at noon to go to the bank. Jagger, where are you now?"

I'm on that slope above the road, about halfway between Danta Rush's place and yours. Can anything be done to get him out of jail?

"Stars alive, there must be something. But Peter will know. If I could just talk to him now—but he's in a different grade, and has recess at a different time. Maybe I can sneak out again and catch him. Jagger, how—how does your leg feel after walking so far?"

Adequate, he told her, quoting a favorite reply of Elder Norfo. *But don't worry about me. You and Peter have got to think of some way to get Danta Rush released. As soon as possible*.

"I—I'll do my best."

Jagger waited. He saw the other car go by, moving fast, and realized there was no one in it but the driver. Suddenly it occurred to him that Waddley Purdom must be sending for more men. A great many men, probably, for wouldn't the killing of all those animals last night get the whole country aroused and start a

bigger hunt than ever?

There wasn't any doubt of it. Furthermore, the terrible creature believed to be the killer—the great white banshee—had actually been seen and his trail located. Any dog with half a nose would be able to track it to the end.

The sudden comprehension of his peril drove Jagger to his feet. Somehow, in spite of his weakness, he must contrive to leave the area without leaving a trail that could be followed. But how?

There was one simple way, though it was risky. Suppose he went on to the road to make it appear he'd gone that far, then followed his exact path back to the cottage? When the hunters trailing him with their dogs reached the road, wouldn't they be forced to believe he'd continued in that direction or possibly found a ride? While they were searching for him far down the road, he could be hiding near the cottage, perhaps in the shed. The difficulty would be to get there without being seen.

Deciding that it was worth the risk, Jagger limped down to the first wheel rut, and actually went a few yards on it before backtracking. He was some distance up the slope again, well past the tree where he had first stopped, when he heard cars approaching. They were coming from town.

He sank down in dismay and watched while they roared past below. There were five cars, and though he could not see them clearly, he could tell they were jammed with armed men. The fifth car pulled a small trailer filled with dogs.

How had the men managed to get here so quickly? The lone driver he'd seen could hardly have had time to reach the main road. Then he remembered that during the first hunt some of the men had carried small radios. Waddley Purdom must have used one this morning. And the lone driver? Probably he had been sent to get other men who had not heard the rancher's call.

Jagger drew back his lips and gave a long low growl of baffled anger. Doubling on his trail was out of the question now. In a very short time the dogs would be after him, followed by a growing army of hunters. He was too weak to outrun the dogs, or even fight them. Yet somehow he had to stay alive because of Nan and Peter.

For a moment it hardly seemed possible. Too many were against him, and they could corner him easily. But suddenly a deeper growl of defiance rumbled from his throat, and he started grimly down to the road.

If he couldn't double on his trail, he must use another trick to fool the dogs. It was too bad Danta Rush hadn't thought earlier to rub more turpentine on him. That probably would have held back pursuit for the rest of the morning. But wouldn't water serve him just as well? The running water of a stream?

The creek, whose rushing clatter he had been aware of ever since his arrival here, was a muted sound far to the east. He crossed the road and plunged downward on the other side, moving as swiftly as three uncertain legs would carry him. His feet rustled through the fallen leaves as he curved lower on the long gradual slope, and the music of the creek became louder. Once a startled deer sprang away from his path, but he sent it a quieting thought and it stopped and eyed him curiously as he forced himself on. He did not dare stop so long as he could continue to move, for at any moment he expected to hear the distant baying of the new dog pack on his trail.

When he did stop, it was in sudden surprise at the unexpected sight of open

land ahead and a wire fence barring the way. On his left, at the same moment, he glimpsed the creek. It tumbled out of the dimness of the woods, flowed under the fence, and wound away along the edge of a broad pasture dotted with strange animals.

Jagger stared at the creatures. They were horses, the first he'd ever seen. As his fascinated gaze roved over the pasture, he made out the white house in the distance, with the white corrals and barns, and it came to him all at once where he was. This had to be Thornberry Farm. He hadn't even dreamed of coming here, but now it occurred to him that the farm might have more than one advantage as a hiding place.

The faint baying of dogs far back on the ridge reminded him of his danger. He studied the fence quickly, and realized it was much too high to be leaped in his present condition. Nor could he go through it or under it, for it was made of heavy strands of barbed wire, fastened close together. But maybe, if the creek was deep enough, he could swim under the thing.

He limped hastily to the creek's edge, and paused again. The water was swift here, and it seemed fairly deep where the fence crossed it. He started down the high bank, but a sudden foxy impulse made him turn and head upstream to a shallow stretch. Here he waded entirely across, then hastened upstream again, following the bank. But after some distance he retraced his steps and waded back to the middle of the creek, then started downstream. That, he hoped, would send the dog pack yelping in the opposite direction from the one he intended to take.

Jagger had a very bad moment at the fence. The water deepened as he approached it, and he was suddenly swimming instead of wading. But he was unable to submerge completely, and the bottom wire caught in the shaggy hair of his shoulders. He was snagged like a big fish—and like a fish he splashed and fought and lunged in vain to free himself.

It was only when he stopped struggling and lay exhausted in the cold water that he suddenly floated away. Had the creek been shallow he would have been unable to stand, but it deepened as the swift current carried him downstream, and by the time a little of his strength returned he had been swept well into the lower part of the pasture. A rocky islet finally halted him.

Jagger crawled feebly from the water. For a while he lay still, grateful for the morning sun that warmed his chilled body. Finally he turned his head and glanced back, wondering how far he had come. A bend in the stream cut off his view, and even the ridge was hidden by the high bank close behind him.

His momentary feeling of security was rudely shattered by the sudden pounding of heavy feet on the bank in front of him.

Jagger's mouth dropped open and he stared in awe at the huge dappled beast with flaring nostrils and flying white mane and tail that was glaring down at him. The creature was no ordinary horse. It was a mighty stallion with a great arching neck and powerful shoulders, and it was swinging imperiously about, stamping an angry hoof into the turf as it demanded an answer to questions.

What are you? the stallion wanted to know. *Why are you trespassing on my domain?*

I am a dog from other regions, he managed to explain. *My name is Jagger, and I came here to hide. I am being hunted by mistake*.

The stallion came closer, and peered curiously down at him. *You are not evil*,

he admitted in some surprise. *I thought at first you were a flesh eater, like the Black One. I was ready to kill you. But you are not a flesh eater. I can tell by your scent*.

You know of the Black One?

I know of him! And I will kill him if he crosses the fence and comes here. I must protect my herd.

A sudden thought entered Jagger's mind. *Are you called Palamedes?*

I am Palamedes, the stallion answered, raising his head proudly. *I am the leader here. How did you know my name?*

The children who live here mentioned you when they came to help me. They spoke as if you were very special to them.

They are very special to me, Palamedes replied. *They and their father, who was master here, are the only humans who have ever ridden on my back. Often in the past I would be allowed to take Nan and Peter all around the farm. Sometimes their little dog, Dandy, would ride with them. Those were joyful days*. The stallion paused, then added, *But things are not like they were. The master has gone, and evil has come here*.

I know, Jagger said. *Nan has told me all about it*.

A change showed in Palamedes. He picked his way down the bank, splashed over to the islet, then touched noses with Jagger in the ancient gesture of friendship.

If the hunters are after you, the stallion reasoned, *they must mistake you for the Black One*.

Yes. The Black One killed many times last night. The hunters believe I did it, and that Danta Rush made me do it. They have taken him to jail. I was forced to run.

Palamedes stamped his foot and snorted in disgust. *Thank your stars that you were not born a human. The tribe contains so many fools*.

That has been my impression since I came here, Jagger admitted. *But Danta Rush and the children are different. I can even exchange thoughts with Nan, just as we are exchanging them now. They are in great danger—or did you know?*

I did not know, though I have been very uneasy about them. Tell me what you have learned, so that I may be of help.

As Jagger explained about himself and told what had been happening, the great stallion's nostrils flared and he stamped his feet in anger. *That woman!* he stormed. *I should have trampled her into the earth when she first came here. She is more twisted and evil than the Black One. Between the two*—The stallion suddenly paused, and Jagger saw him raise his head and stare over the top of the bank in the direction of the house across the pasture.

What is it? he asked, as faintly to his ears came the sound of a car being started.

The woman, Palamedes reported. *She and her man are leaving early to go to town. Something about it worries me*.

But Nan said this was the day they always go to town to do their errands. She and Peter are depending on it.

Yes, replied the stallion. *But never have that woman and her man left so early. If they leave early, they may return early—before Nan and Peter can get their things and slip away*.

Now Jagger was suddenly worried. It was possible that Tess Gomez had more business than usual to take care of today—though it was just as possible she wanted to return early to carry out some plan against the children. At any rate,

Nan must be warned.

He started to call to her, but at that moment he heard her voice in his ear.

"Jagger! What's going on? I—I've been trying like everything to get through to you."

I had a little trouble, he explained. *But I'm all right now. Are you still at school?*

"No. I'm with Peter in the back hall where Pop's lawyer has his office. When I told Peter about Mr. Rush, he said we'd better come here right away, 'cause only a lawyer could get Mr. Rush out of jail. But we're sort of stumped, 'cause Mr. Henderson has gone to the city and won't be back till Monday. And the only other lawyer in town is Mr. Purdom's friend, and he hasn't any use for Indians. What's more, we can't even get to see Mr. Rush, 'cause they put him in the county jail, and that's 'way over in Fort Henry, thirty miles from here. Oh, Jagger, everything's in such a mess!"

Yes, he agreed, wondering what a lawyer was. *But we'll solve it somehow. Every problem has a solution. First, though, we thought you'd better know that your aunt and her husband are already on their way to town. They might decide to return much sooner than you thought.*

"Oh, she won't be back till all hours," Nan assured him. "She told Peter and me at breakfast that they'd be eating out with some friends, and that we'd have to fix our own supper. So she's really making it easy for us to get away. She—Jagger, where are you now? Who—who's with you?"

I'm with Palamedes, at the far end of your pasture.

"Palamedes!" she exclaimed. "That's wonderful! I'm so glad you've met him. Maybe he can help us. After the school bus brings us home, and we pack our bags, we've got to find some place to hide till Mr. Rush can come for us. Maybe we can hide at his house. What do you think?"

It might be the safest place. I'll talk it over with Palamedes. I just wish you didn't have to come back here at all this evening. I don't feel right about it. Haven't you friends in town you can stay with?

"Now don't be silly, Jagger. You know we can't stay with friends. Golly gee, they'd ask questions and want to make phone calls, and they just wouldn't believe it if we told the truth about dear Aunt Tess. Why, most people think she's just grand. Anyway, we'll be back on the school bus—"

I think it would be better if you would leave now and come home early, he insisted.

"Oh, Jagger, you're such a worrywart! Anyhow, we couldn't possibly leave here now unless we walked, and it's miles and miles. Besides, we've got to go to the bank." Nan paused, then added, "Jagger, I don't really want to go home at all, but Peter says we'll need our things, and he's sure we'll be okay if we just follow our plan. You see, when we left her this morning, Aunt Tess still hadn't decided just what she was going to do about us. So we won't be walking into any sort of trap."

All this sounded reasonable enough, though it did little to help Jagger's growing uneasiness. He discussed it with Palamedes, who felt the same way.

But the stallion agreed that Danta Rush's cottage would be the best place to take Nan and Peter. *At least for tonight,* Palamedes added. *Tomorrow—but tomorrow is not here yet. In the meantime we have a long wait till the school bus returns. I think you are safe from the hunters, but I will keep guard while you rest. Rest and the sun will bring back your strength.*

Jagger sighed and made himself comfortable on the islet. But curiosity drove him to a final question.

What, he asked, *are lawyers?*

Palamedes snorted. *Why, they are those peculiar humans who complicate living, and make all the rules that other humans have to live by. From what I've observed, they run practically everything—and profit handsomely*.

How strange, Jagger commented. *I'm surprised humans are willing to put up with them*.

They are forced to, he was told. *After all, most humans haven't the common sense of creatures like ourselves, so how could they get along without lawyers? Do they not have them where you came from?*

No. We have philosophers instead. But they give everyone a bad time too.

NINE *He Solves a Deadly Riddle*

Jagger dozed, and dreamed fitfully of happier days when he would go racing over the green hills at home, with Anda and Lillet clinging to his back. As he dozed he could hear their gay laughter again, and the little songs they always sang. He hardly felt their weight. He was so big, and they were so small, that he often carried them all day when the Elders permitted it. It was a wonderful place, home …

Then something nudged him awake, and he opened his eyes to a vastly different world. Palamedes was standing watchfully beside him.

You were dreaming of home, Palamedes told him.

Yes.

I caught part of your dream, the great stallion admitted. *You must miss your world and your friends. I would like to see a place where humans do not kill and children sing all day*.

Jagger sighed unhappily, and Palamedes added, *But you are here now, and there are problems to face. How do you feel?*

Jagger rose slowly and tested his legs. The warm sun had brought back much of his strength and dried the bandage around his wound. In spite of being soaked in the icy creek, the wound had not bled, nor did the leg hurt when he moved it.

I am strong enough for what is ahead, he told Palamedes.

That is good, for there are difficulties. The school bus is approaching now—but the hunters and the dogs are still searching the ridge. It may be necessary to wait till dark to take Nan and Peter to Danta Rush's place.

But we cannot leave them in the house till dark. Tess Gomez may return, Jagger objected.

True, Palamedes agreed. *We will bring them here first, and take them to Danta Rush's place later. But there is a great difficulty. The Black One has returned to this side of the ridge. I became aware of him only a short time ago, when I went to the edge of the woods to check on the dogs and hunters*.

Jagger chilled, and a low growl started in his throat. Then Palamedes raised his head and peered over the creek bank toward the distant road. *There is the bus*, he announced. *It will be better for you to stay out of sight while I meet the children. You might be seen if you cross the pasture in daylight*.

As Palamedes trotted swiftly away, Jagger leaped from his islet to the bank and climbed into the willow thicket at the bend in the creek. The spot gave him a good view of the ridge as well as the pasture with its herd of horses. Beyond the horses he could make out the bus on its way back to town, and the figures of Nan and Peter, small in the distance, running up the farm road to the house.

He called to Nan, and saw her turn her head when he told her where he was hidden. *Get something to tie your bags together*, he added. *Then Palamedes can carry them across his back. He'll be waiting for you at the gate and bring you here to hide till it's safe to go up on the ridge. The hunters are still there*.

"I'll tell Peter," she said. "But we've got to eat something first. We missed lunch at school, and we're starved."

Jagger watched her vanish into the house, then momentarily he turned his attention to the ridge. Ignoring the vague sounds of men and dogs, he sent his mind out, probing. Abruptly he recoiled as he touched the horror that lay in wait up there for the first unwary creature that ventured too close. The thing was to the left, well away from the area of Danta Rush's cottage. Apparently the dogs, far to the right and higher, were still unaware of it. But the horses in the pasture knew of it, for they were all standing motionless, staring in the same direction.

The hair on Jagger's neck stood up and a low growl broke from his throat. Then he forced his attention back to the house.

Don't take too long, he called presently. *If your aunt decides to come back …*

"Oh, she won't be back for hours," Nan replied quickly. "And I'm so hungry I could die. Hot diggity! There's some of our fudge left—I was afraid she'd eat it all, but she didn't. Pop's old cook still makes it for us, and it's the best ever. Jagger, did you ever eat chocolate fudge?"

I've never heard of it, he told her. *But if you like it so well, bring it along and eat it later. Please, you must hurry. I have a very strong feeling about it*.

"Oh, all right. We'll eat it while we pack. We won't be five minutes …"

Jagger waited. At the other end of the pasture he could see Palamedes standing restlessly by the gate, which he was unable to open. The afternoon suddenly darkened and turned to evening as the sun slid behind the ridge, and a spreading bank of clouds began to blot out the sunset colors. A chill breeze came down from the heights, promising an unpleasant night.

It was uneasiness more than the chill that made Jagger shiver and finally drove him to his feet. As he stood up, Palamedes announced that a strange car was turning into the lane, a small new one that had never been here before.

Jagger watched it speed toward the house. The moment it stopped, Palamedes called frantically, *It is the woman and her man! They have returned early in a different car! Tell Nan—I cannot reach her!*

Jagger put all the force he could muster into the warning thought he sent forth. His effort brought no response. Still calling, he bounded from the willow thicket and began racing across the pasture. Far ahead of him Palamedes was rearing angrily before the high wooden gate and beating upon it with his hooves. The plump figure of Tess Gomez and the thin one of her husband had already crossed the porch of the big house and were vanishing through the door.

Jagger did not spare his injured leg, and he was determined to leap the fence rather than waste time with the gate. But as he reached it, the big gate splintered under the stallion's battering hooves, and he and Palamedes sailed over it together.

The two gained the house at the same time. It was only the stallion's brief hesitation at entering the home of a human that allowed Jagger to cross the porch and get to the door ahead of him. Fortunately, in her haste, Tess Gomez had left the door ajar, or it might have received the same treatment as the gate. Jagger sprang into the hall, with Palamedes close behind. For an instant they halted, listening. Then the silence of the place drove them to action—Jagger racing up the stairs, and Palamedes clattering through the lower rooms, smashing crockery in his trembling anxiety and knocking over furniture.

It took Jagger only seconds to discover that the upstairs was empty. He quickly found Nan's bedroom, then Peter's, by the lingering scent in each. Their bags were there, partially packed. But the children had vanished.

Downstairs, Jagger met a wild-eyed Palamedes who informed him that not a soul was to be found, and that the only place left to search was the cellar, which he could not enter. Jagger hurried down the narrow stairway, which was much too small for the stallion's great bulk, but he was back almost in the same breath. From the vague scents below it was obvious that no human had been down there all day.

Jagger was badly shaken. What could have happened here? Had Nan and Peter been taken away somehow? Or had they vanished before the arrival of the car? Where were Tess Gomez and her husband now?

The last question was suddenly answered as he became aware of hurrying footsteps outside, somewhere near the front of the house. Jagger raced through the hall and out across the porch, and was in time to see the thin dark man getting into the driver's side of the car. Tess Gomez was on the other side, tugging at the door.

She was just as he had visualized her: a big blond woman with a small tight mouth and pale round eyes as hard as flints. There was an instant when he saw the pale eyes widen upon him, incredulous, then Tess Gomez screamed.

Having screamed, she somehow got the car door open and tumbled inside, babbling, "It's the banshee! For the love of God, Luis, get going!"

As he leaped forward, Jagger's only intention was to read her mind and discover, if he could, what had happened to Nan and Peter. But the sight of her brought such an angry reaction that his hackles came up and he could not repress a snarl that would have frightened a wolf pack. Tess Gomez screamed again, and the car shot abruptly away, motor roaring. Jagger, suddenly sick at heart, watched it fade into the dusk. He had learned nothing.

He started back into the house, intending to explore it again. On the porch he paused as Palamedes came out, stamping his feet and glaring wildly around.

The children are not inside, the stallion told him, badly upset. *All my senses tell me that. What could have happened to them?*

I cannot understand it, Jagger replied. *They were not in the car. And Nan does not reply when I call.*

The two were silent a moment. Then Palamedes said, *Something is very strange here. Whatever happened to the children must have happened before the man and the woman came. I tried to warn Nan of their coming, but she did not answer. Of course, my power to communicate is not as strong as yours. Did she answer you?*

No, Jagger answered. *Her last thoughts to me were that she and Peter would eat their chocolate fudge while they packed their things. But when I went upstairs I found their bags only half packed. Something happened to them upstairs. But what?*

It was the chocolate fudge, Palamedes replied instantly.

I do not understand. What sort of food is that?

The stallion explained. *I like it myself*, he went on. *In fact, all my kind are fond of sweets, but very little have we had since the master left. The surprising thing is that the woman left some of the candy for the children. That is not like her. She is greedy as well as mean. Usually she eats it all herself.*

Although Jagger had known that evil was afoot, he could not help the shock

that went through him as he suddenly realized where this conversation was leading. *Are—are you trying to tell me that Tess Gomez put something dangerous in the candy? Why, I've never heard of such a thing!*

Then you don't know humans, Palamedes said. *They think nothing of setting out poisoned food for small creatures*.

Jagger stared at him. *And you believe Nan and Peter were poisoned?*

Not exactly. The woman is too smart for that. The fact would be discovered, and she would be blamed. It begins to look as if something was placed in the candy that put the children to sleep. The humans have drugs that act very swiftly. Only—

Only what? Jagger questioned.

I do not understand the rest. Why did the woman and her man come back when they did? And why did they use a different car, and go away so soon? And where are the children now?

Jagger stood very still, thinking hard. Had he had more experience with the humans of this backward world, he would have seen the truth earlier. But all at once it came to him.

Where, he asked Palamedes, *is there a place where Nan and Peter could be hidden? It would have to be somewhere near us*.

I do not know. Just what kind of place? Palamedes asked.

A sort of hole, perhaps. One they cannot get out of, and where they would die before they were found.

Palamedes pounded a hoof upon the porch, trying to think. *I do not know of such a spot, not even a cave*.

There has to be one. And it has to be close—because Tess Gomez and her husband were able to take them there in the short time they were here. That is why they returned when they did—for they knew they would find the children asleep from eating the candy.

The stallion snorted with anger. *Of course! I understand it now. And they came in a different car so they would not be noticed. Probably got it from a car dealer, pretending they wanted to try it out*. Palamedes stopped suddenly, then rushed into the yard. *Come! We will search the buildings behind the house. The man and the woman carried the children out through the back door. No wonder we did not see them. It is all so simple …*

Yes, thought Jagger, hurrying around the house with Palamedes. It is all so simple—but so wickedly clever. They must have thought of it this morning, when they heard what the banshee had done. They would hide the sleeping children in this special place, and everyone would think that Nan and Peter had gone there themselves to escape the banshee. Only, when the children would finally be found, after a long search, they would be dead.

But how would they die? Jagger asked himself. Not by starvation, surely. That would take too long. In this special place, death must come quickly—and it must seem accidental.

What would such a place look like?

They had reached a small barn a short distance behind the house. Palamedes, trembling with anxiety, ran through the open door, looking wildly to left and right. But Jagger stopped at the entrance, his nose testing the air, while his mind probed the shadows ahead.

Since the children would be unconscious, he did not expect his mental search

to be very rewarding, nor was it. Detecting nothing, he hurried to a smaller building on the left, the door of which was closed. Here, a quick mental probe told him *something* was alive inside, though the contact was as faint as one of the vague human scents that came to him. But suddenly he was sure that the scent was Nan's.

Calling to Palamedes, he sprang at the door and tried frantically to move the stubborn latch with mouth and paw.

Out of my way! the stallion ordered.

Jagger leaped aside, and Palamedes crashed into the door and smashed it down as if it had been made of cardboard. In the dim room beyond, Jagger ran straight to what seemed to be a large old metal cabinet which filled one corner. He did not immediately realize what it was, but he saw instantly that it was fitted with the kind of latch that would automatically snap in place when the heavy door was closed—nor could it be opened from the inside.

He lunged at it, caught the big handle in his teeth, and pulled. The weighty door swung outward, disclosing the limp, unconscious forms of Nan and Peter.

TEN *He Lays a Crooked Trail*

As Jagger hurried to drag the children from their prison, he realized that suffocation would have been their fate if he had not discovered them in time. The cabinet, with its heavy door that fitted so tightly, was airless, and there was no escape for anyone trapped inside.

It would have been said, of course, that Nan and Peter had hidden in the thing to escape the banshee. And Tess Gomez would never have been blamed.

He was wondering about the cabinet when Palamedes told him it was an old farm refrigerator, built for holding large quantities of food. *Only, it is not used for food as we think of it*, the stallion added. *It belongs to the woman, and she had planned to fill it soon with the carcasses of creatures the man would kill. Their flesh must age before it is eaten. Like the Black One, the woman is an avid eater of flesh*.

For the moment, Jagger had put the Black One out of his mind. Tess Gomez was by far the greater danger. For the unexpected had happened, and it was beyond him to guess what she would do. Men and dogs might soon be swarming over the place, hunting for the monster that had frightened her. Or she might come back and find the children missing from their prison—which surely would start her on a deadly hunt of her own …

Jagger took a firm but careful grip on Nan's clothing with his teeth, and carried her behind a tree at the edge of the pasture. He hastened back and brought Peter the same way.

What is your plan? Palamedes asked.

I want to take them to the far side of the pasture where you found me, and hide them in that willow thicket by the creek.

There is still some light, the stallion reminded him. *You are bound to be seen from the ridge if the woman gives the alarm. You forget how big and white you are*.

No one will see me if some of your kind will walk beside me and hide me. But not too many. Perhaps you should lead the way so the others will seem to be following you naturally.

Palamedes called several of the older mares to the tree, and these formed a shield as the first crossing of the pasture began. Fortunately the children had not taken time to remove their heavy jackets when they reached home. They needed them now in the chill wind coming from the ridge, and the extra layers of clothing made it much easier for Jagger to carry them.

He hid Peter in the willows first, then returned with the same guardian group beside him and brought Nan. By this time twilight had come, and moving lights could be seen on the ridge. Now Jagger paused and thoughtfully studied the pasture and the ridge a moment, planning his next move.

I will go halfway back to the house, he told Palamedes. *Then I will turn and walk alone to the ridge, leaving a trail the hunting dogs can follow. While I am doing that, you and your kind must walk back and forth over the part of the trail leading here. Do you understand?*

I understand, Palamedes said. *We will place our hooves where you have stepped, and wipe out your scent that leads to the children. But you must be very careful. Soon the dog pack will be at your heels, and the Black One will be directly in your path*.

I will be careful.

Jagger touched noses with the stallion, well knowing it might be the last time they would ever see each other, then turned to carry out the second part of his plan.

It was black dark by the time he reached the wire fence at the edge of the forest, and he was limping again to save the wounded leg. Though he had not mentioned his returning weakness, he had no doubt that Palamedes was aware of it, and was deeply concerned as well. Ordinarily he would have relied on his great strength to carry him over the high fence, and deal with the uncertainties on the other side. But now cleverness must serve him instead.

Getting under the fence was the first problem. He finally managed it by enlarging a spot washed out by rains. On the other side he glanced quickly back at the farm road, where the headlights of cars were streaking toward the house. These, and the faint rushing sound of the creek in the opposite direction, told him he was about on a line with the danger area he must be so careful about.

Though the wind was in his favor, it was veering to the right and he was unable to catch any scent from above. Finally, after he had climbed stealthily for some distance through the forest, he let his mind reach forward, searching. Almost instantly it touched the horror. His mind recoiled, but not before he had made the startling discovery that the thing was asleep.

With any other creature this might have made his task much easier, but he knew better than to relax his vigilance even for an instant. The important part was to get as close as possible without being discovered.

The sudden sound of the dog pack entering the pasture told Jagger he had gone far enough. Very carefully, so as not to disturb so much as a leaf, he began to retreat. He was able to backtrack halfway down the slope before the dogs, held on leash by the hunters, arrived at the fence. Now Jagger put all his strength into a great leap that carried him well off the trail. By the time the hunters had crossed the fence, he was long on his way to the creek.

He had not counted on the men arriving with their dogs. The fact worried him. He had set the trap mainly to turn the dogs from his trail and prevent Nan and Peter from being found. But the men, heedless of Danta Rush's warning, were walking into the same deadly trap. Still, the weapons they carried were powerful. Perhaps the Black One would be destroyed.

Jagger's night vision was better than his sense of smell, and he did not catch the Black One's hateful scent on the veering wind until he saw the two frightened deer racing ahead of him. Then abruptly the ridge behind him was shaken by a demented scream of rage, and there followed such a terror of sound that it seemed as if all the demons of the pit had been loosed upon the world. Into the awful medley went the hoarse shouts of frightened men, the snarling of dogs, and sudden rapid bursts of gunfire.

Jagger stopped and looked back, his floppy ear held straight as he listened. Once more he sent his mind out, this time probing curiously. Men and dogs had been hurt, and he could feel their pain and fear. The Black One remained

untouched, but from its senseless mind boiled an incredible hate that was past understanding.

It was now that Jagger made a startling discovery. The Black One could see perfectly at night. But it had only one eye.

At the creek, Jagger swam under the fence as he had done during the morning —taking care to avoid being caught in the wire—and allowed the current to carry him downstream. He would have preferred to walk, for he hated to get wet again with the night turning so cold, but he knew it would be foolish to leave a trail that could be followed into the pasture. After what had happened tonight, everyone in the county would be alarmed. By dawn, a huge hunt was bound to begin.

Just past the fence, an anxious Palamedes succeeded in getting his attention.

You are safe? the stallion asked.

I had no trouble, Jagger told him. *But others were hurt, some very badly. The Black One was untouched*.

That is too bad. But at least you have drawn the hunt away from the children.

How are they now?

Peter is awake. He must not have eaten as much of the chocolate as Nan. She is still asleep.

Near the willows finally, Jagger crawled out and shook the water from his matted hair and then rolled in the grass, trying to make himself as dry as possible. It did little good, for he was as cold and miserable as he had ever been, and in his weakness he had begun to shiver violently. It was only after he had curled up against the great warm body of Palamedes, who had settled down near the children to shield them from the icy wind, that his shivering gradually stopped.

Peter, huddled close against the stallion, was trying vainly to wake Nan. “It—it must have been that fudge,” the boy mumbled. “D-d’you reckon it was doped, Jagger?”

Jagger touched him with a paw, and nodded. Then Peter asked, “How did we get here? Did you bring us?”

Again Jagger nodded. Peter said, “That—that racket over on the ridge a while ago. I can’t figure what it was about, but I’m willing to bet you were mixed up in it. Were you?”

Jagger nodded once more, and Palamedes made a sound deep in his throat that was almost a chuckle. “Golly,” said Peter. “I sure wish I could talk to you two the way Nan does! I’m missing a lot.” He was silent while he went back to shaking Nan, and occasionally slapping her cheeks, still trying to wake her. Finally he stopped and muttered, “M-maybe I ought to let her sleep it off. Her heart and her breathing sound okay, and Pop used to tell me that as long as those are normal there usually isn’t too much to worry about. Anyhow, I—I sure hate to have her find out what a pickle—”

Peter swallowed, and went on. “They must have planned to come home early and finish us off somehow, knowing we’d go for that fudge. Only, you found us first. Right? What a dumbhead I was! Anyway, we’ve sure got to thank you two.” He sighed, and shook his head. “I never knew before what it was like not to have a home, or even a place to go. But I know now. It—it’s an awful feeling, Jagger,

to have something like this happen to you. I—I don't want Nan to know it, but I'm scared. I—I just don't know what to do."

Nan began to move her head and mutter unintelligibly. All at once she opened her eyes, then struggled to a sitting position and looked wildly around. It was some time, however, before her head cleared enough so that she could listen to Jagger and understand what had happened. When she was able, she told Peter all that Jagger and Palamedes had done.

Finally she asked, "Wh-what do you think we'd better do?"

Jagger had been worrying over that problem all the way back to the willow thicket. This far corner of the pasture was probably the safest spot for many miles around. They were well hidden, and it was very unlikely that anyone would come here. But how long could the children stay here without food or shelter?

How do you feel? he asked Nan.

"S-sort of awful," she admitted.

Do you think you and Peter could ride to Danta Rush's place on Palamedes?

"Maybe I could if—if I hung on to Peter and we don't go too fast. I—I'm so dizzy."

Jagger peered across the pasture at the house. It was ablaze with lights, and he could see the lights of cars moving up and down the road. From the looks of things, Thornberry Farm was going to be a very active spot for the rest of the night. By dawn it would be swarming with people.

Going to the bronze man's cottage by way of the road was out of the question. Yet if they cut through the woods, there was the danger of the Black One. The creature had not left the lower ridge, for he could still feel the deadly vibrations of its fury.

Is there a back way to Danta Rush's place? he asked next.

"Yes," Nan told him, and repeated the question to Peter.

"But it's a lot farther," Peter said, "and I don't know how we'd get through the north gate. It's padlocked, and Palamedes could never knock it down, because it's made of steel."

The steel gate is not as high as the wooden one, Palamedes said. *I can jump it easily if they will dismount and climb over it*. Then he added, *It is turning colder. Soon it will be freezing. The children are not dressed for such cold, so I think we should start immediately*.

Peter was wobbly on his feet, but he managed, with Jagger's help, to climb onto the stallion's back. Nan had more trouble, for she could hardly stand. But at last, shaking with the cold, she was settled behind Peter and clinging tightly to him.

Palamedes started away, then stopped and looked back at Jagger. *Are you coming with us?*

No. It will be better if I return the way I came this morning. It would be foolish to leave a new trail that might lead hunters straight to the cottage.

With some uneasiness, he watched the dim bulk of Palamedes and his riders fade into the night. Had he made the right decision? Suddenly he wasn't sure.

ELEVEN *He Overhears a Plot*

At the moment Jagger had little heart for the long climb back to Danta Rush's place. It meant getting wet again and forcing a weakened body through numbing cold when everything in him was crying for rest. Then he thought of the snug room with its warm hearth that awaited him, and he drove himself down to the creek and began wading upstream.

It was not too hard at first. By keeping to the shallows on one side, he was able to make good progress without going in deeper than his chest. But the stream narrowed and deepened as he drew nearer the fence, and suddenly he was in all the way, struggling grimly to make progress against the current.

Jagger almost despaired of actually getting under the fence and making it as far as the shallows where he had crossed in the morning. Yet somehow he managed it, and was able to crawl out at the exact spot where he had entered it. But now his stumbling legs would carry him no farther, and he sank down in the autumn leaves, exhausted.

It was the hateful scent of the Black One that suddenly shocked him to an awareness of his danger.

His floppy ear straightened, seeking the sound of movement, but all that could be heard was the rustling of leaves in the biting wind. Yet the thing was approaching. He knew that by the changing scent, and the mounting waves of hate that beat upon him like a soundless drum. The creature hadn't discovered him yet—the hate was directed at all things living, as well as at the increasing cold which it seemed to abhor. But it was only a matter of moments, Jagger realized, before his own presence would be known.

Never in his life had Jagger retreated before danger, and though Elder Norfo would have told him that only frogs and fools stand fast against thunderbolts, it galled him to be forced to his feet and driven away. He went stealthily at first, making no more sound than the thing itself, and with every step his eyes roved the darkness, searching. But he saw nothing that moved. Nothing whatever. He knew he was lucky *not* to see anything, for certainly the creature would have seen him also. Yet the fact brought the hackles up on his neck, and made him feel that he was dealing with an invisible evil against which he was powerless.

Jagger's hackles did not go down until he was well beyond range of the hateful scent and could no longer feel the vibrations from that deadly mind. He was halfway to the road by now, carefully following his morning trail. So exceptional was his memory that he finally crossed the road by stepping backward in his old footprints, which he hoped would fool any hunter who might stop to examine them.

Above the road the way was easier, though he was hardly aware of it in his exhaustion. He limped along mechanically, head down against the wind, and ages later stood swaying on the back porch of Danta Rush's cottage. He was chilled to the marrow and colder now than he had ever been. He was so numbed

by it that he was not immediately aware that the cottage was empty.

All at once the unpleasant truth struck him like a blow. Palamedes and his two riders had not yet arrived.

As nearly as he could guess, it was sometime after midnight. Even walking slowly, the stallion, with his great stride, should have been here first.

What could have happened?

Jagger stood trembling with cold and fatigue, trying to make his numbed brain work. Once he managed to paw open the screen door, but when he put his teeth to the knob of the kitchen door, he found that it had been locked. Finally he went over to the pile of neatly stacked wood at the side of the porch and started to lie down out of the wind. But before he could get settled, he heard a car approaching.

It was coming from farther up the road, from the same direction he expected Palamedes to appear. What was a car doing at this time of night, on this remote road, unless it was someone searching for Nan and Peter?

Jagger was suddenly alert, his floppy ear standing up straight as he listened. The car stopped in front of the cottage. He heard two people get out—a man and a woman. They were talking in low, fearful tones, and though their voices were muffled in the night, he knew instantly who they were. Their thoughts were clear enough.

"We're wasting time, stopping here again," the man was saying as they came up on the front porch. "And it's not safe. That devilish animal could be anywhere …"

"Shut up, Luis," Tess Gomez ordered shortly. "I don't like it any more than you—but we've got to find those kids. Hurry and try those keys in the door."

A human might not have heard the faint repeated sound of metal scraping metal, but Jagger caught it all. Abruptly a bolt clicked, and he was aware of the front door being opened. Footsteps sounded inside, and the moving beam of a flashlight momentarily brightened the kitchen window near him.

"There's nobody here," Luis Gomez muttered. "I told you that the first time."

"We didn't come inside then. They might have been hiding. Look in the closets, under the bed, everywhere …"

There were sounds of a hurried search, then came an uneasy silence. Jagger could feel the woman's baffled anger—and her fear.

Suddenly Tess Gomez said tensely, "I don't understand it! How did they get out of the refrigerator? Somebody must have helped them."

"Naw! Who would know about it? I tell you it was the blasted latch. Those kids just woke up too soon. When they started to kick and push, the thing opened."

"Then where did they go?"

"Dang it, Tess, they were bound to head up this way. This is the nearest house. And if they didn't find old Danta home, and couldn't get in, they'd sure go on to that timber shack."

"Then why weren't they there?" she snapped.

"I can figure a couple good reasons. Either they got lost or scared or something and are hiding out in the brush, or that thing caught 'em. It near killed Jake Hathaway, and Bill Thomas was torn up bad. You saw the teeth on that white

monster."

"I saw them."

They were silent a moment. Then Tess Gomez spat out, "I hope that's what happened. It would sure save us some trouble. But somehow I believe they're hiding in the woods. Maybe they heard our car, or saw the lights, and are just waiting for the chance to sneak in here when we leave."

"You could be right, doll."

"If I am, I'll fix the little snots! We'll go home and leave this door unlocked. Then, as soon as it gets light, we'll come back—but we'll do it quietly. They'll be so tired from being out most of the night that they'll never know a thing …"

Jagger, seeing what was in her mind, found it hard to repress a growl of revulsion. Even the man, he realized, had no heart for the deed ahead but was powerless to assert himself against the will of such a woman.

Jagger waited until their car was far down the road, then he limped painfully around the house and opened the front door.

Inside, he sank in near-exhaustion on the hearth. It was such a relief to be out of the cold and off his feet that for a moment his mind blanked out and he could not remember the urgent thing he had to do. Then an anxious and indignant Cleo, who had been hiding under the kitchen sink, came out and touched noses with him and demanded to know who the intruders were and what was going on.

He managed to give her the information. Then his memory came awake with a jolt and he began calling Nan.

She did not answer. In desperation he called again and again, but Nan remained silent.

Finally he called Palamedes. It brought a quick reply. *We have had trouble*, the stallion told him. *Nan is sick from that stuff in the candy. I think she got more of it than Peter. Twice she has fallen, and ach time it was very difficult to get her on my back again. Peter has her in front of him and is trying to hold her in place. Then near the old shack the man and the woman came in their car, and we had to leave the road and hide until they left*.

The man and the woman were here, Jagger informed him. *They plan to slip back at dawn and destroy the children if they find them, then burn the house*.

Dawn is only a few hours away, Palamedes replied. *That gives us very little time. But we will think of something*.

It seemed forever before Jagger heard the careful hoof-beats approaching on the road. He hastened outside and managed to place himself so that Nan could be lowered from the stallion's back to his own. Then, with Peter stumbling alongside and supporting her, he carried Nan into the cottage.

Inside, Peter took over. Though trembling with cold and practically blind in the dark, he located matches, lighted a lamp, and hurriedly wrapped Nan in blankets by the hearth. Then, expertly, he kindled a fire in the fireplace. In a very short time the logs were blazing and the room was warm.

Peter, however, was already in the kitchen, opening cans and trying to heat food on the oil stove, which he had some difficulty getting going. Presently he was back at the fireplace after warming soup for Nan and himself, and a large bowl of some kind of peas which Jagger accepted gratefully.

He watched Peter feed Nan a few spoonfuls of the soup. She swallowed it after

briefly opening her eyes, but before he could get her attention and tell her what had to be passed on to Peter, she fell asleep.

Jagger was suddenly worried. How was he to let Peter know about Tess Gomez and her plan to return at dawn?

Peter finished his soup and, head nodding with weariness, brought extra blankets and a pillow from the bedroom and placed them on the floor beside Nan. Finally he went to the front door, evidently with the intention of locking it.

"That's funny," he muttered suddenly, after examining both sides of the door. "There's no key. Jagger, was the door unlocked like this when you got here?"

Jagger shook his head.

"You mean someone opened it *after* you arrived?"

Jagger nodded.

Peter bit his lip, then slipped out onto the porch. He was back in a moment with a key. Carefully he locked the door with it.

"I know what happened," he muttered. "They—they came by here, looking for us, 'cause we saw them up at the shack. Only they didn't know Mr. Rush always hides his key on the porch when he leaves. So that Luis—he used one of his own. He wouldn't go anywhere without his skeleton keys."

Peter came slowly back to the hearth. He put another stick of wood on the fire, and said thoughtfully, "But why'd they leave the door unlocked when they left? Was it to make it easy for us to get in?"

Jagger nodded emphatically.

"So that's it!" Peter burst out. "That means they're planning to come back. Do you know when?"

Jagger made a quick estimate of what he had learned of the hours, and touched the hearth five times with his paw. *Now get some sleep*, he urged, even though he knew Peter couldn't hear his silent message. *I will wake you before they come.*

TWELVE *He Lives Up to His Name*

In spite of the watchful corner of his mind, which always remained sharply alert, Jagger slept soundly through most of what remained of the night. When he awoke suddenly, because of some warning from that watchful corner, he was not immediately aware of the reason for it. In fact, everything seemed blessedly quiet and peaceful.

Nan and Peter, bundled in blankets before the hearth, were sleeping as if they hadn't a care in the world. Outside, the wind had died, and it was so still he could plainly hear the soft rushing of the distant creek. The birds had not yet begun their pre-dawn singing.

Jagger went to the front window and peered out. He was so intent on trying to discover what had awakened him that he was not immediately aware that much of his old strength had returned. There was only a slight stiffness in his wounded leg to remind him of the ordeal of the past few days.

Outside, vague in the starlight, he could see the dappled form of Palamedes dozing in the thick grass beyond Danta Rush's truck. If there was danger afoot, it had not yet come to the stallion's attention.

Troubled, Jagger sent his mind reaching outward. It probed up the winding road, then down through the forest-covered slope, and around through the areas where the Black One had been after he had driven off the hunters. In all that stretch it touched upon nothing more dangerous than a small hungry creature that might have been a roving fox.

Jagger was about to turn his probing to another part of the ridge when a faint sound caught his attention. His floppy ear stood up and twitched forward in the direction of Thornberry Farm. At the same moment Palamedes raised his head and listened. Only in this cold stillness before the passing of night could so small and distant a sound be heard.

That sounded like a car being started at the farm, Jagger told Palamedes.

It is the woman's car, the stallion answered. *But I thought they were not coming till dawn. Why would they come so early?*

I am sure it is because of the hunt, he explained. *They did not realize at first what is going to happen—that as soon as it is light enough to see, there will be hundreds of men searching the ridge. If they intend to carry out their plan and burn the place to hide their evil, they must not be seen coming from here*.

Palamedes stood up. *They must be stopped. But first, the children should be hidden somewhere else for a while*.

You are right. If you will take them to a safe spot, I will deal with the man and the woman.

Jagger nudged Peter awake, then turned toward Nan. She opened her eyes at his touch, and blinked uncertainly around at the room, still dimly lighted by the lamp.

How do you feel? he asked.

"L-lots better'n I did," she whispered.

Nan, we must leave. Can you ride Palamedes?

She sat up slowly. "I—I'll sure give it a try. Wh-what's happened?"

Peter will tell you. Have him put some cans of food in blankets to take with us. He must hurry—we haven't much time.

There was a quick exchange between Nan and her brother. Then Peter ran to fill a pair of blankets with things from the kitchen. Hastily tying them together, he went to the door and unlocked it.

Nan was wobbly on her feet, but by clinging to Jagger she made it to the edge of the porch, where Palamedes stood waiting. There, with Peter helping, she managed to scramble to the stallion's back. Peter flung over the tied blankets so that they hung on each side like a pair of saddlebags. Then he sprang up behind her.

Be careful, Jagger cautioned, as the stallion swung away into the darkness. *We must not forget the Black One*.

I will be very careful, came the reply. *And I will not go far. When you have driven off the man and the woman, I will return to the cottage. It should be safe during the hunt. But take no chances with those two, my friend. The woman, she is more deadly than the Black One*.

When Palamedes had vanished up the road, Jagger started off swiftly in the opposite direction. The headlights of the Gomez car were not yet visible, though he could hear it approaching far down the long slope. At the first bend he stopped. It was just the right distance from the house. The road widened a bit here, giving ample room for a car to turn around. It seemed a likely spot for the pair to leave their machine if they intended to go the rest of the way on foot.

Jagger retreated halfway back to the cottage, then picked a large tree and crouched behind it to wait. This, he thought, is a good place to begin the act. They will have their weapons, but if I leap upon them suddenly, howling like the banshee I am supposed to be, they will forget their weapons and run. Perhaps I should knock them down and make them crawl. The more trouble I give them, the more terrible the experience will seem.…

Headlights flashed suddenly down the road. Presently the car swung partially around the bend, stopped, and the lights went out. The two in the car sat whispering together for a while, then Jagger heard the doors being opened and softly closed. Soon the beam of a flashlight played briefly over the road, and to his ears came the stealthy sound of approaching footsteps.

Jagger's mind reached forward. It touched the uncertainty and fear in the man, and almost recoiled as it felt the driving hate in the woman. There was fear in her too, but this was almost crowded out by the hate. It was an overriding force that vibrated in her just as it did in the Black One.

It shocked Jagger, and it frightened Luis Gomez.

"You wouldn't!" he was whispering hoarsely. "You got better sense!"

"Shut up!" she spat at him. "If I want to work them over, I will. I've always hated those rotten brats!"

"But if you pull anything like that—"

"I said to shut up! I ought to give you a working over too—it's your fault those kids escaped. If you'd been tending to business, we wouldn't have to be put through this!"

"But, Tess, I don't see why we should even—"

"You're chicken!" she hissed. "You've been chicken all along—and on top of it you're a fool! If we ever give those smarty kids a chance to talk to the sheriff …"

Jagger did not hear the rest. His attention was abruptly diverted by another vibration of hate, a far stronger and more frightening vibration that came from somewhere on the slope behind him. It jerked him around, and sent his mind probing frantically to locate the horror. Even as he searched, he suddenly realized it was the Black One that had awakened him so early—and that there had been something very strange about it.

The lack of scent? No, it couldn't have been that. There was no scent now. The breeze—what there was of it—was moving up the slope and away from him. No, there had been no warning scent—nor had the night been charged with that deadly rhythm that was beating upon him now.

Then what had the horror done to awaken him?

All at once Jagger forgot the question. He had located the thing. For a moment it was motionless, high above him. Then it began moving downward so swiftly that it took all his attention to keep up with it.

It was impossible to see. It kept to the blacker shadows, sweeping through them like a detached streak of blackness and gathering speed as it came. It was heading straight for Tess Gomez—as straight as if drawn by a magnet.

A magnet? Was hate a magnet for other hate?

The question was not of Jagger's asking. It suddenly presented itself, and there was no time for an answer. He sprang into the road, trying to give a bark of warning. But before he could force a sound from his throat, the horror gave its own cry—a demented scream of rage. At the same instant it launched itself upon the nearer of the two approaching figures.

Tess Gomez had time for only a short cry of fright. It might have risen to a scream had she lived a few seconds longer, but it was the last sound she ever made. Luis Gomez, knocked down and badly torn by the hurtling blackness, and overcome with terror, was capable only of a series of senseless gasps as he clawed to his feet and darted back to the car. Somehow he got it going and turned around, then shot madly away down the twisting road.

Jagger did not even glance back at the scene of the tragedy. It was all over in the blink of an eye, and he had seen it, and now his senses were concentrated upon following the Black One. It had whirled and vanished in the direction Palamedes had taken.

Somehow he must overtake it, or at least manage to get between it and the stallion.

Jagger raced up the slope, taking an angular course that would put him behind the cottage and near the upper curve of the road. As he neared the beehives he was suddenly aware of Nan calling frantically.

"Jagger! Jagger! Can you hear me? Are you all right?"

I can hear you now, he replied. *And I'm all right. But tell Palamedes to stay away from the cottage. The Black One is somewhere near it*.

"Oh, golly gee! Something terrible's happened. I—I just know it."

Yes. The Black One killed Tess Gomez.

He could feel the shock in her. Then she whispered, "How—how utterly

awful!"

Now listen to me, both of you. Palamedes, can you hear me?

I hear you, the stallion replied. *What is it, Jagger?*

First, is there a safe spot near you where you can take Nan and Peter?

There is the place of vines, where I used to take them when the master was living. We are nearly there now. It is a bluff at the top of the ridge. The only approach is from the front, and I can guard that with my hooves.

Then go there—and be very careful of your thoughts and feelings.

Nan said, "We—we don't understand."

Try not to feel fear. And above all, do not hate anything.

"B-but, Jagger," Nan almost wailed. "That doesn't make sense. So much is hateful!"

Perhaps so. But I've just remembered something important Elder Norfo once told me: Hate is a magnet for hate. So you must not hate the Black One.

"B-but he's hateful, and horrible!"

That makes no difference. You must not hate anything, or he will feel it and be aroused. Tess Gomez came here hating you, and he felt it. She is dead now because of it.

"I—I still don't understand. It—it's so—so complex."

It's not complex at all, Jagger insisted. *It's simple. I've seen the Black One. He has been hurt somehow. His mind is gone. He is only to be pitied. When he feels violent thoughts around him, it arouses him to violence. So don't hate anything. Your life may depend upon it. Understand now?*

"I think so."

Then make sure Peter and Palamedes do. I will see you when I can.

"Jagger!"

Yes?

"You—you're planning something. Wh-what is it?"

You're not to think about it! Don't even call me.

The sky was paling and the birds, suddenly, had begun to sing of the coming day. For a moment Jagger listened to them with pleasure. They reminded him so much of home. His world and this one were practically twins, probably born at the same time, made of the same ingredients, and given the same forms of life. Only, this was the backward twin. The birds didn't sing quite as well here, nor was the air quite as sweet. Or was he merely imagining all this because of the people?

Suddenly he realized that, as soon as there was light enough to see, the great hunt would begin. Already he could hear cars speeding on the main road. If the badly wounded and terrified Luis could talk, men would come up here first and carry Tess Gomez away. Then the hunters would swarm through the woods, hating the horror that had killed again. Hate and fear would spread over the ridge. Fear alone might draw the demented Black One into another bloody orgy like the one with the frightened cows on the Purdom ranch. Only this time it would be with humans.…

Already Jagger had circled swiftly, so that now he blocked the way to the place of vines. It was directly behind him, across a tiny meadow overgrown with goldenrod. Somewhere in front of him, in the dark tangle of trees and thickets,

he knew he would find the Black One. The scent was almost lost in the cold dry air, nor at the moment was there the least vibration from that tortured mind to guide him.

For an instant Jagger debated his next move. Should he take a chance and enter the tangle before he had located the creature? The sound of approaching cars far down on the ridge road decided him.

Carefully he began picking his way forward, sending quieting thoughts ahead. It would take only one disturbing thought, he knew, to awaken that damaged brain and ruin everything. He realized now that something must have briefly disturbed the Black One earlier, which was why he himself had suddenly been awakened.

The sky was brightening, and a red glow was spreading across the world. Jagger was hardly aware of it. He had detected something ahead, a living thing that seemed to be asleep—just as it had seemed last evening. Only, he knew at last it was not sleep the thing was experiencing, but a sort of trancelike disconnection.

Rest, he told it soothingly. *You've had a bad time. Rest* …

All at once he saw it—a great dark form lying across his path, its remaining eye staring fixedly at nothing.

Jagger eased closer, and still closer. One small mistake, he knew, and the thing could spring to furious life in a twinkling and he could be ripped to shreds. But he did not allow the thought to surface.

Rest, he continued, and at the same instant he sprang, his great jaws closing like a mighty trap upon his victim's neck.

The thing screamed to life in a flash, spewing hate and fury in a raging horror of sound that could be heard the length of the ridge. But the great jaws were set. Only the death of one or the other would cause them to open.

Jagger had never experienced such ferocity and strength. Long after he would have broken another creature's neck, the Black One spat its hate and fought on. Then in a burst of force that took all the power of his will to summon, Jagger gave a mighty jerk of his head that flung the black body over his shoulder. Abruptly something snapped, and the battle was over.

I am sorry, he told the soul of the Black One. *I did only what I had to do. I am of the race of guardians, and I must protect those who cannot protect themselves. Do you understand? I bear you no ill will, and I hope you are released from torment*.

I understand and forgive you, said the soul of the Black One. *But I find it hard to understand and forgive humans. Why did they trap and cage me? Why did they shoot me and destroy half my sight and most of my mind when I fought only to be free and go home? Was it because I was a rare member of my kind? Was it because I was black, and larger and different? Why?* …

Jagger tried to explain that his own experiences here were not of the best, and that his troubles were the result of a certain backwardness in humans that he hoped time would correct. *They are the strangest of all creatures*, he added. *I do not fully understand those in my world, which is a far better world than this one*….

He stopped, for he realized that the soul of the Black One had gone on, seeking answers elsewhere. Now for the first time he heard the shouts of approaching hunters, and above them all the worried voice of Danta Rush calling his name. Nan too was calling to him frantically, as was another whose voice was curiously

different, yet familiar.

With considerable effort, for the battle had nearly exhausted him, Jagger tried to answer everyone at once while he struggled to drag the limp form of his adversary into the open. Hardly had he drawn it into the morning light when he heard a warning cry from Nan. Glancing up quickly, he saw that his time of danger was far from over.

A group of hunters, who had burst from the trees a short distance away, had stopped suddenly and were staring at him in disbelief.

"What a dog!" one was saying. "Look at the *size* of him!"

The gaunt figure of Big Joe Tanner pushed to the front. Behind him, panting, came Waddley Purdom.

"That ain't no dog!" Joe Tanner cried. "It—it's that devilish banshee—the white one!"

"Kill 'im!" Waddley Purdom roared. "Quick, kill 'im!"

"No!" yelled Danta Rush, springing toward them as both men raised their rifles. "Hold your fire!"

At grave risk of being shot himself, the bronze man managed to knock the barrels of both weapons up just before they were discharged. Then he jerked them from their angry owners, and with mighty swings of his powerful arms smashed them against the nearest tree.

They turned upon him cursing, fists clenched and faces contorted. Each made the mistake of trying to hit him, and each in turn was knocked flat, and treated to a burst of language that astounded and delighted Jagger.

"That," the bronze man finished, "is just first payment for having jailed me on a false charge. Next time either of you crosses my path, I won't pull my punch. I'll break your head! You stupid fools, you nearly cost the lives of two children!"

"But—but how were we to know—"

"Shut up! There are men in the hospital because you refused to listen to me. And there's Tess Gomez. But I won't speak of her—she was your friend, not mine. Luis was hurt so bad he thinks he's going to die, so he confessed to the whole rotten business."

He spun away from them and hurried over to hug Nan and Peter, who were now clinging happily to Jagger. Palamedes stood tossing his mane, watching. An awed incredulous and admiring circle was rapidly gathering. They stared at the great body of the Black One, then at Jagger, and shook their heads.

"Mr. Rush," one of the hunters said, "I never seen critters like these two. I know the white one's a dog of some kind, about the biggest ever, I reckon. But I can't figger the black varmint."

"Nor can I," said the bronze man, shaking his head like the others. "One of the great cats—but a very rare black one, possibly a mutant. The *size* of him! Must have escaped from a circus, and someone shot him. What a shame he wasn't killed! I'd rather be dead myself than kept in a cage." He stooped, pointing. "Look what the bullet did to his head.…"

Jagger was hardly aware of the growing circle around them. He was suddenly alert, his floppy ear standing up straight as he listened. Then he realized that the curiously different yet familiar voice he heard was in his head.

Jagger? Jagger? I am sure you are near. Can you answer?

Jagger quivered with excitement. But for the moment he was so overcome that

it was utterly beyond him to reply. Nan said, “What’s the matter, Jagger? Is something wrong?”

I—I’ve just heard the voice of my Elder at home.

“Oh dear!” Her chubby arms tightened about him. “Do you s’pose he’s come to take you back?”

The possibility of such a thing had never occurred to Jagger, but now he suddenly realized this must be the case. There was nothing Elder Norfo couldn’t do if he put his mind to it. In fact, Jagger had more than once suspected him of slipping away and visiting places unknown with the help of one of his secret contraptions. But these excursions were never mentioned.

Jagger! Elder Norfo called again. *Please answer if you can hear me!*

I—I hear you! Jagger managed to reply at last. *Where are you?*

At the top of the hill where you landed after the disturbance. It is the only place you could have landed after what happened.

You—you’ve come to take me home?

Of course I’ve come to take you home! What else would bring me to this dreadful place?

Jagger felt Nan’s arms tighten again. She seemed on the verge of tears. How could he leave when she and Peter needed him?

In a quick exchange he told the Elder all that had happened since his arrival. *So you see*, he finished, *I have found friends who need me. I cannot leave them now*.

Jagger, this is not your world, the Elder told him. *I have visited here before, to my sorrow, and I have returned only because Lillet and Ereen cry for you, and Anda does not eat. So consider where you are needed most. I will wait for you till the sun reaches midday*.

Jagger was brought back to the scene around him by a sudden eager whinny from Palamedes. The stallion was staring at a distant figure who had just come limping from the woods. The man gave a sharp whistle, and Palamedes began racing across the meadow.

Danta Rush stood up and gasped, and others turned their heads and stared. Nan and Peter jumped to their feet. Jagger’s mind reached forth briefly, questing. His heart went out to the thin anxious man who had survived a long and terrible ordeal in a jungle because he wanted to come home to his children.

Abruptly Peter gave a little cry and started racing after Palamedes. Nan screamed, “Pop! Pop! I knew you’d come back!” She began to follow Peter as fast as her uncertain legs would carry her.

Jagger felt a wave of happiness for all of them. Quietly he stood up while no one was watching him, and slipped back into the woods. Now he too began to hurry, but in the opposite direction.

There has been a change, he called eagerly to the Elder. *I am no longer needed here, so I am going home with you*.

About the Author

Alexander Key (1904–1979) started out as an illustrator before he began writing science fiction novels for young readers. He has published many titles, including *Sprockets*: *A Little Robot, Mystery of the Sassafras Chair*, and *The Forgotten Door*, winner of the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award. Key's novel *Escape to Witch Mountain* was adapted for film in 1975, 1995, and 2009.

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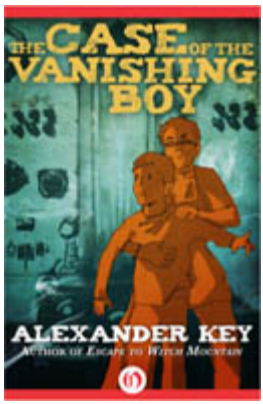

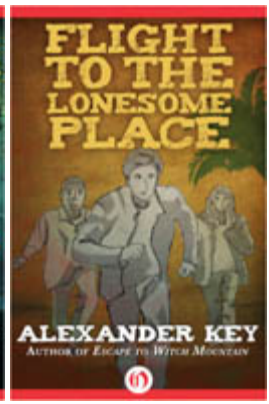

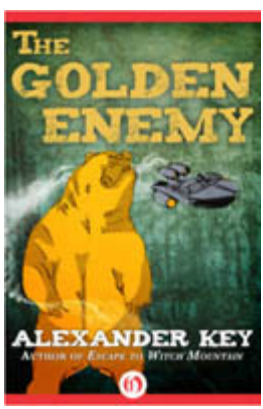

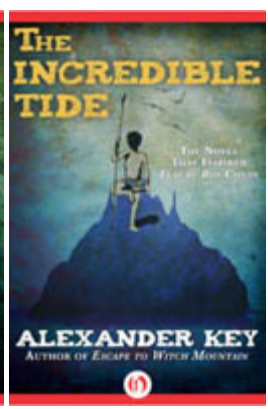

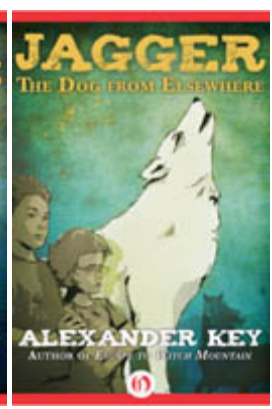

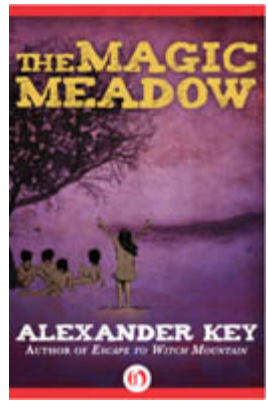

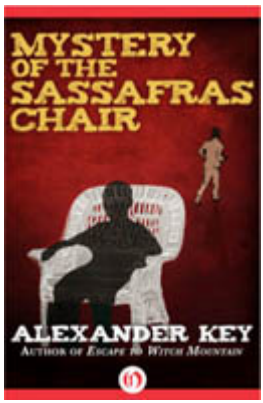

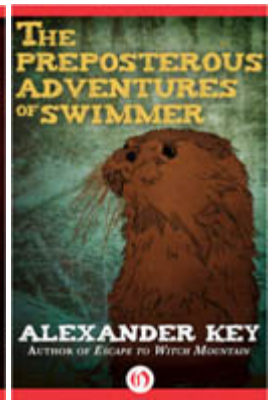

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